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KEEN-KNIFE, PRINCE of the PRAIRIES.

BY OLL COOMES,
AUTHOR OF "ANTELOPE ABE, THE BOY GUIDE," ETC., ETC.



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CHAPTER I.

THE PRINCE TO THE RESCUE.

It was mid-September, and the day was near its close.

The air was balmy, with just breeze enough to rustle the forest leaves and stir the tall prairie-grass into gentle continuous billows.

The wooded aisles were rife with that mingled sweetness so peculiar to the woods at this season of the year; while upon the prairie, the air came laden with the odor of a hundred different kinds of beauteous flowers.

Not a sound could be heard in the forest—not a living object could be seen upon the great prairie; but as the moments wore on, the figure of a youth emerged from the forest shadows and paused upon the edge of the plain.

He was not over eighteen years of age, and his buckskin garments and numerous weapons told that he was one of those daring, hardy fellows—a hunter and trapper of the great Northwest.

He was of medium height, with a well-developed form, sinewy limbs and muscles, and a face as handsome as it was clear in its display of the predominant traits of his character. His eyes were of a dark-brown, and although mild and pleasant in expression, they were as quick and sharp as the eyes of a hawk.

With his rifle resting in the hollow of his left arm, his head erect, and his brows knitted in a manner denoting close scrutiny, the youth swept the plain before him.

But a single object appeared upon its green bosom, which stretched away for miles and miles in a gently-undulating expanse. That object was a mere white speck, and appeared on the summit of a hill over three miles away.

With steady eye he watched it, wondering what it could possibly be. In a few minutes, however, a second and third white object appeared on the crest of the prairie wave, and then a light of recognition beamed in the young hunter's eyes.

"It's a party of immigrants," he said to himself, "or my name is not Rob Radcliff. Them 'ere white objects are their covered wagons, and now it strikes me they're goin' to have trouble, for the Sioux are rampagin' everywhere after scalps. It may be only a party of men able to take keer of themselves, but if there's any women 'mongst them, may God protect them. Surely they're not ignorant of the danger into which they're goin'. If I thought they were, I'd go straight and tell them to turn tail and git. They'll 'bout make the river to-night and camp; then I'll try and go down and see who they are and whar they're goin'."

The youth turned and glided into the forest,

and moved away at a brisk pace through its leafy aisles.

A few minutes' walk brought him to the edge of a large opening, or glade, several hundred acres in area. It was of an elliptical form, and cut in two by the Raccoon river, which, flowing in a northeasterly direction across it, described the short diameter.

In the dense thicket, bordering the glade, the youth again paused and gazed upon the scene that was presented to his view.

Upon the banks of the river nearly half a mile away, stood a goodly-sized log-house of no mean pretensions, with front facing the river and a trellised porch overgrown with wild ivy and honeysuckle. It was inclosed by a rail fence, which, also, encircled some forty acres of the rich valley land, that were in a good state of cultivation, as a promising crop of maize bore witness. Beyond the river a herd of cattle tended by a negro boy was grazing.

Not far from the main building were two or three others, quite small and hovel-like. These were the cabins of the servants who tilled the land and tended the herds of the man who claimed all, and who dwelt in the large house with the vine-clad porch.

But, what was most strange about this little settlement, was neglect of defensive measures, such as a block-house, stockade and loop-holes in the buildings; and the absence of them was sufficient evidence of their owner being on terms of peace and friendship with the Indians.

But were those terms of peaceable intercourse honorable? or were the owner of that place and his servants in league with the dusky denizens of the forest?

These were the questions that the young hunter had often asked himself, but without a definite answer. He was satisfied, however, that the tall, dark-faced man that owned the Hidden Home, as the place was called by the hunters and trappers, was not altogether right, and his having thus secreted himself and family in such an out-of-the-way place, was an act enshrouded in some mystery. The youth had every reason to believe that his professed honorable calling was only a scheme to cover up some evil work. He had only been there about two years, and, as yet, no words of suspicion had been carried to the ears of the Territorial officials, hence his peace from that quarter. Only the hunters and trappers thereabouts were in a cloud, not so much from his secret location and calling, as his being on friendly terms with the Indians.

Rob Radcliff had been to the house of Don Manuel La Mort, as he had heard the lord of the Hidden Home called, but had met with such a cool reception from the strangers as told him at once that his presence was not desired, and boded him no good. And now, as he paused within the edge of the thicket that fringed the valley, it was in hopes of gaining some clew to the mysteries of the Hidden Home.

He had not watched long when suddenly the clatter of hoofs broke the silence of the hour. Then, from the woods on the right, a snow-white pony galloped into the opening. Upon its back was seated a young white girl of some eighteen

summers—a being as fair as the young trapper had ever gazed upon. A graceful and rounded form with every feature handsomely developed; red cheeks and lips; dark brilliant eyes, and hair that was black as the raven's wing and hung in wavy tresses down her back—all these made her a being of rare beauty to the eyes of Rob Radcliff, the Boy Hunter.

For a moment he feasted his eyes upon her, then he involuntarily stepped from his covert into the opening.

The beautiful girl saw him, and at the same moment drew rein and turned her animal's head toward the stranger.

The Boy Hunter approached her with a puzzled expression upon his face.

"Pardon me, miss," he said, apologetically, "for interrupting your peaceful ride."

"I was not aware that you had, young man," the maiden replied, kindly; "but your face looks familiar, and if I mistake not, you have been at our house."

"If you live yonder," he replied, pointing toward the house of Manuel La Mort, "you probably have seen me there, but I'm sure I never met you before, and would be pleased to know who you are."

The maiden smiled at his rude politeness, and then having glanced uneasily around her, she said:

"My name is Camilla La Mort. I am the daughter of Manuel La Mort, the owner of this 'Lone Estate,' as we call it; and it would not be well for me to be seen holding communication with a stranger."

"Ah! then your privileges are limited?" Rob said.

"Yes, sir; that fully expresses the fact of my case. I am not allowed to speak to any one unless it is one of our servants or the Indians. I cannot say why it is that I am refused this privilege."

"Then your folks are on friendly terms with the Indians?"

"Yes, sir."

"How does that come, when us trappers can't say our scalps will be our own the next hour?"

"I cannot say, unless my father exerts great influence over them. We have lived here two years, and have never had any trouble from that source."

"And may I ask where you're from to this country?"

"Such information I have been forbidden, under penalty of the lash, ever to breathe to any one."

"By whom were you forbidden?"

"My father."

"He must be a monster!" the youth exclaimed, though he had scarcely uttered the words ere he regretted having done so, and was about to apologize for his rash speech, when the maiden said:

"My father is a Spaniard by birth and an American by education. He was born and bred in Louisiana, from whence he came to this country. He is of a fiery and impetuous nature, and it would be death to you and me both were he to know of this conversation, so I must away."

"One moment, Camilla," said the Boy Hunter; "does not your father follow some evil calling here in this secluded spot?"

The face of the maiden became slightly flushed, and in a tone in which there was a tinge of scorn, she said:

"Would you ask me to convict my father?"

"No, no, Miss Camille," the youth cried, regretfully, "not for the world; yet the nature of your question is an affirmative answer to my question. I know you are not entirely happy here in this secluded home, and it has been suspected among us hunters and trappers that Don Manuel La Mort is not what he pretends to be."

"You are right in that, young man. Father's calling here is one in opposition to the laws of our country; and I am unhappy—very unhappy."

"Since you have admitted that his business is an evil one, would you refuse to tell me what it is? Perhaps I might do something to alleviate your unhappy life."

The face of the maiden grew brighter, for in the free, open countenance, and the honesty of the youth's questions, she saw that she could place confidence in him.

"If you will give me your promise that you will never breathe the source from whence you received the information, I will tell you all. Also, promise to do me a favor in return by carrying a message to one many long miles from here."

"I promise you both, upon my sacred word and honor," returned the youth.

"Then come nearer, there may be prying ears around," she said, and when the Boy Hunter approached nearer, she continued: "For over a year father has been following the evil calling of a—"

She did not finish the sentence, for just then there came a crashing through the thicket behind them, followed by the massive tread of feet.

Filled with sudden fear, Camilla gave her pony the reins and dashed away; but our hero calmly turned to see who the intruder was.

A tall, dark man, with clouded brow and flashing eyes, was approaching him.

It was Manuel La Mort.

In one hand he carried a heavy rawhide riding-whip, and as he advanced toward the young hunter, he raised it aloft and fairly hissed between his set teeth:

"Curses upon you, you young buckskin, I'll cowhide the life out of you! I'll teach you the price of loafing about my premises like a sneaking whelp, and meeting that girl in secret to worm from her that which does not concern you—*my business here*."

He approached our hero and grasped him rudely by the shoulder. The youth saw the vindictive gleam of his dark eyes, and the facial muscles twitching with anger. He knew the fire of the man's impetuous spirit was raging within his breast, and that he had a terrible foe to deal with.

Boldly the youth confronted his adversary. He never flinched from his strong grasp, yet he seemed like a child by the side of the giant, Manuel La Mort.

"Be careful, Don La Mort!" exclaimed our hero; "one lick of that whip will be your death-warrant!"

The giant did not heed the warning, but summoning all his strength, he brought the whip downward through the air.

But the youth was on the alert, and as the rawhide descended, he threw up his hand and caught it near the giant's hand, and arrested its further descent.

Quick as a flash his fingers closed upon the stock of the whip, and then, with a movement equally as quick, he snatched it from La Mort's hand.

Springing lightly backward, the youth raised the scourge and gave his enemy a cut across the eyes that sent him staggering away, howling with rage and blinded with pain.

The young hunter was about to follow up the advantage already gained, and apply the whip upon the giant bully until he begged for quarter, but at this juncture three half-nude figures glided from the thicket, with yells that could have been heard for miles.

It was a party of La Mort's friends—Sioux Indians!

Before the Boy Hunter could draw a weapon, the foremost savage was upon him, but quick as a flash of lightning he struck the savage across the face twice in succession with the whip, and sent him to the earth, writhing and howling with agony.

The second savage closed upon the youth, and before he could strike again, pinioned his arms at his side.

The third savage now rushed up, and grasping the youth by the hair with the left hand, drew a scalping-knife with the other.

The next moment the weapon was at the young hunter's head. One circling sweep of the blade, and a cry of fiendish triumph burst from the red-skin's lips, as he flourished aloft the Boy Hunter's scalp!

But it was the last scalp-cry of the warrior. The next moment, he fell dead, with a bullet through his brain.

Then forth from the thicket leaped another form—the form of a young Indian, in the hand of whom was a rifle from whose muzzle a thin wreath of smoke was curling.

It was the white man's friend, Keen-Knife, the Prince of the Prairies!

CHAPTER II.

A DOUBLE SCALP.

As Keen-Knife leaped from the thicket to the rescue of his young friend, he uttered a peculiar and terrible war-whoop that was readily recognized by the Boy Hunter, as well as his enemies. Then he sprung upon his friend's captor, bringing a tomahawk down upon his tufted head, burying the weapon to the eye in his brain.

The savage that Rob had struck with the whip, as well as Manuel La Mort, hearing the cry of the terrible young Prince of the Prairies, struggled to their feet and beat a hasty retreat toward the cabins of the Lone Estate.

Keen-Knife would have given pursuit, had

not the condition of his young friend demanded his attention.

The Indian youth, although a few years older than Rob Radcliff, was apparently much younger. His face was devoid of paint, and that usual silent and low cunning expression so characteristic of the Indian. He was of medium height and build, yet with firm-knit limbs, powerful muscles, a deep, full chest, and wide massive shoulders. His eyes were black, and bright as polished ebony; and his hair, of the same hue as his eyes, hung in a long, flowing mass down his back to his hips. Around his head, flaring outward at the top and set with a number of small silver stars, was a fillet of red leather, to which was attached two or three white eagle-plumes.

His garb was made after the prevailing fashion of the white hunter, though of a material that would have dazzled the eyes of an old borderman. His tunic was made of deep-blue cloth, trimmed with yellow fringe around the skirts, and confined at the waist by a belt of wampum. Around the shoulders was a cape of spotted fawn-skin, to which was attached a necklace of bear's-claws. The feet were incased in buckskin moccasins highly ornamented, and the leggings were of some green material, fringed up the side with yellow buckskin and stained feathers.

Keen-Knife was no Indian dandy. The pure blood of a once powerful, but not extinct tribe coursed his veins. He had been raised from infancy by a white family; for years he had been the boon companion of that noted youth, Antelope Abe; he had imbibed many of the principles of the white man, and was known as the white man's friend. From those whom he had served in the capacity of scout, had he received those fancy articles of clothing, made by nimble white fingers whose fair owners vied with each other for the good graces of the young Prince of the Prairies.

"Is Bold-Heart hurt?" he asked, turning to young Radcliff.

"No; but by the blue blazes, Keen-Knife!" exclaimed the Boy Hunter, "your comin' was just in the nick of time to save that varmint goin' one skulp deeper."

"What does my young friend mean? Did not the Sioux get his scalp?"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the youth, "he got one of them, Prince, but not the one I think the most of. That's twice that old rig of a wig has been mistaken for a genuine skulp. It pays to wear two skulps, Prince. See here."

The youth placed his hands to his head and removed the remnant of a wig, revealing a head of short, crispy hair of a dark brown color.

A low, silent laugh escaped the lips of the young Indian when he saw how artfully Bold-Heart, as he called Rob, had cheated the savage and the scalping-knife. Then turning, he drew his own keen blade and completed his victory over the two fallen Sioux by removing their scalps, which he fastened at his girdle, then said:

"Let us hasten from this spot, Bold-Heart, or other dangers may come soon. The dark-eyed man living yonder escaped, and he will strike for revenge."

"Let him strike," replied the youth, "and I'll strike back. He'll be more cautious hereafter, for he has already felt the weight of my blows. But lead the way and I will follow you, Prince."

The young Indian turned and glided into the thicket, closely followed by Rob, and soon they were threading the cool forest aisles. Keeping to the left of the Lone Estate, they soon reached the river-bank a short distance from the opening.

Here they paused to listen, but not a sound broke the silence of the hour, save the murmur of the river flowing at their feet.

"Will we go to our homes now?" asked Keen-Knife.

"No, Prince," replied the youth thoughtfully. "I shall not leave this place until I have had another interview with the maiden I met a while ago. I believe she's not the darter of old La Mort. She don't favor him a bit, and I feel certain she's a kind of free prisoner, willing to escape if she only knew where to go. I must know more about her, Prince, and shall hang around the place till I gain the desired information."

Keen-Knife shook his head negatively, and replied:

"If the dark-browed man heard her speak with you, he will put bonds upon her and you will see her then only in the wolf's den."

The Boy Hunter's brow knitted with anger.

"Curse him!" he exclaimed. "I will take his life, but what I release her."

The Indian smiled and said:

"Bold-Heart loves the daughter of the dark-browed man."

"No, no, Prince, I can't say that; but I must say my sympathies have been aroused in her behalf. She's young and handsome, Prince, but never, never has the passion called love disturbed my breast. I've a curious heart that way. It never has, nor do I believe it ever will, throb in unison with any other heart."

"Time brings changes to the heart as well as to the body and mind, Bold-Heart," said Keen-Knife.

"That may all be, Prince. I consider it no disgrace for a fellow to love a purty girl. But, see here: awhile ago I saw an emigrant-train of several wagons comin' over the big prairie, and, judging from their course, they will strike the river 'bout two miles below here. It may be emigrants wanting a guide, and if so we might secure the job and make a few extras, as pelt-ries are not worth anything nowadays. If you'll go down the river and see who it is, Prince, I'll make a scout 'bout the Lone Estate, as the gal called it. I'll meet you here again at midnight."

"I will go down the river and look after the train, as my young friend desires; but hate to see you go alone about the Lone Estate. Dangers hover around it. But Bold-Heart has keen eyes and ears, and let him keep on his guard. I will be here at midnight."

"That's you, Prince," replied the Boy Hunter, "and now I will lean out for tall timber."

They separated, one going down the river and the other up.

The face of Keen-Knife wore an expression of regret and anxiety. He did not entirely favor

the project of his young friend reconnoitering about the Lone Estate. He was satisfied that every approach to it was guarded by the tools of La Mort.

But, with his rifle at a trail, the red youth glided briskly along the river with every faculty on the alert.

He had gone thus some distance when suddenly the prolonged reverberation of a rifle came booming down the valley and died away in faint echoes through the woods. It came from up the river, and what was most alarming about the report, was its being closely followed by a wail as of human agony.

Keen-Knife stopped. He knew it was not the report of Bold-Heart's rifle, and a cloud of fear swept over his face.

He believed his young friend had got into trouble, and turning, he glided rapidly back up the river.

Soon he came to where they had parted.

He stopped and listened. All was silent—silent as the grave itself.

Looking up Bold-Heart's trail, he set off to follow it. It was, however, with great difficulty that he did so, for the white youth was almost as expert in hiding a trail as Keen-Knife was in following one.

He moved on several hundred paces and was nearing the edge of the Lone Estate, when he discovered that the trail suddenly became deeper and plainer. The steps were further apart, which fact alone convinced Rob's red friend that Rob had set off at a rapid run. Still a few steps on he saw numerous other tracks in the yielding soil, and where the old leaves had been torn up as if by the feet of persons in a hand-to-hand encounter.

This satisfied Keen-Knife that his young friend had met with a savage foe—probably a dozen of them, and had been slain.

He looked around and was not a little surprised to see drops of blood spattered over the leaves. Some one had been wounded, either Bold-Heart or an enemy.

The young Indian halted and gazed around him. It was now almost sunset, and twilight shadows were gathering in the woods. A deep, dread silence prevailed—a silence that was ominous as death itself to the ear of Keen-Knife.

With his hands clasped over the muzzle of his rifle, and his neck craned forward, he gazed around him with a steady eye.

Suddenly he started and a low cry issued from his lips, as his eyes fell upon a heap of old, dank leaves and twigs that had been raked together quite recently into an elongated pile, a foot or two in height by five or more in length.

What was the meaning of it? Was it a snare to entrap him?

For a moment the young Prince of the Prairies stood and gazed at the object; but he soon satisfied himself that there was no life beneath it, and advanced cautiously toward it.

Before he reached the pile of leaves he saw where some heavy body had been dragged along upon the ground. The trail was marked with streaks of clotted blood, and ended at the heap of leaves.

Keen-Knife's worst fears were in a manner

realized when he suddenly discovered a human moccasined foot protruding from beneath the pile of decaying vegetation.

Then he knew a lifeless human body lay buried there.

He halted, almost sick at heart. There was not a doubt in his mind but it was the lifeless form of his young friend, Bold-Heart, the Boy Hunter.

CHAPTER III.

THE FAIR FUGITIVE.

JUST at sunset, three days previous to the opening of our story, a party of emigrants went into camp on the banks of a little stream that found its way into the Raccoon river.

There were eight or ten canvas-covered wagons, besides a two-wheeled vehicle, whose contents were hidden by a long wooden box.

The general appearance of the emigrants and their outfit was not of the rougher and meaner sort. On the contrary, they were a pleasant, bright and intelligent-looking party, and their wagons and stock were of a superior grade.

The party was composed of some forty persons, including several African servants and teamsters. The presence of the negroes was evidence of itself, that most of the party hailed from the Southern States, as was, in fact, the case.

The eldest of them, and the apparent leader of the party, had passed the meridian of life, yet he was a tall, powerful man in whose air and deportment there was a strong military bearing, which evidently came as much of nature as habit and disciplinary training.

His face wore a few wrinkles, and his hair and long flowing beard were white as snow. There was a remarkable degree of firmness and dauntless courage manifested in his steel-gray eyes and upon his stern, bearded face.

This was Major Thomas Bronson, or more familiarly known as Major Tom. He had won the title of major by invaluable services as a soldier; and as an old campaigner, there were none in the party better qualified to lead it into the dangers of the Great West, than Major Tom Bronson.

He was a widower, and in fact, it might have been said he was alone in the world had it not been for his adopted daughter, Dora Barnwell, a bright-eyed little maiden of some sixteen summers. In her the old major found much joy and happiness, for she was a merry-hearted and vivacious little creature, full of innocent mischief and enthusiasm, which had a tendency to gain the love of every one, and which kept an air of cheerfulness around all.

There is another person in the party who requires our personal notice. It is Frank Heyward, a youth of some two-and-twenty years. He was not only prepossessing in appearance, but a man whose whole bearing indicated intelligence and mental culture. He was kind and polite to all, full of life, brave and daring to a fault; and like Dora Barnwell, he was one of the bright attractions of the little party.

Frank had no relations in the company, but between him and the major there existed a

mutual friendship. The young man's father and Major Bronson had been friends from early boyhood, and when David Heyward died, the major found a true representative of his old friend, in his son Frank.

During their journey, Frank and the major were noticed, upon many occasions, in private consultation, which was invariably ended whenever any one approached them. And although not the shadow of a suspicion of any wrong was entertained by any of the party, they all believed the two had some secret object in view in coming West, far more important than the major's colonizing scheme. But what it was, no one could form the slightest conception.

As before stated, the party hailed from the South, with one or two exceptions. They had the fertile valley of the Raccoon river in view for planting a colony, although they were breasting many dangers in their undertaking.

The creek upon which they had encamped was covered on one side by a dense growth of cottonwoods, beneath whose arcading boughs and foliage, the wagons were drawn and the tents pitched. The animals were corraled at the edge of the prairie, and a guard posted on either side of the encampment.

During the preparations of the evening meal, those that were not engaged passed the moments in various ways.

A group of four were seated at one side, looking over a map of the Great West.

"You see, major," said Ethan White, "we must be nearing the Raccoon—I should judge we were not over a day's journey from it, at furthest."

"That is my opinion, exactly," said Major Bronson, "and if we are in the right latitude, I am almost certain we will strike the very point of which I spoke. It has been some ten years since I passed up the river with the party of explorers; but at that time, I remarked upon the great natural advantages offered for a colony upon the river where we are going."

"Then the tract of land lies contiguous to the river?"

"It is a vast plain rising from the river's banks, and extends eastward for miles, where it meets a low escarpment of table-land, or rolling prairie. There is timber in abundance north of the little creek that forms the northern boundary of the plain."

"But I fear, major," said White, "we will be too far inland to make agriculture a success."

"Why so?"

"We will be too far from a market for our products."

"That depends entirely upon circumstances. If we should make stock-raising a specialty, it would—"

"A horseman! a horseman, coming this way at a rapid speed!"

These words rung in stentorian notes from the lips of the guard stationed at the edge of the prairie; and the next moment the whole camp was in a state of general excitement.

Men, women and children rushed to where the guard was on duty, and gazed with anxious and inquiring looks in the direction indicated.

Far away upon the plain, over a mile distant,

they could see through the gathering twilight, the dim outlines of an approaching horseman.

Almost simultaneous with this discovery, they saw another horseman far behind the first. This was followed by a third, fourth, and so on, until fully a dozen appeared in sight, and were apparently in pursuit of the one furthest in advance.

This was suddenly verified by a wild, savage yell. They were Indians, and that solitary horseman a fugitive. Yes, and by Heavens, that fugitive is a woman!

This the settlers could plainly see in the flying skirts of her dress, the flowing hair and white, scared face.

"To arms, men!" cried Major Tom. "Let us to the rescue of the fugitive! It is a woman, and God only knows what a tale of horror her lips may unfold. There must be, or have been, a settlement near, and she alone has escaped. Where else could she have come from?"

"From an emigrant train, perhaps, major," said Frank Heyward.

"Well, we'll soon know," replied the major; "forward, boys, to meet the savage foe!"

The next moment the men, with rifle in hand, issued from the grove onto the prairie. But no sooner had they done so than the Indians were seen to come to a sudden halt, evidently taken by surprise at sight of the armed emigrants.

But the fugitive seemed to take new courage, and came on directly toward the camp.

In a few minutes she drew rein in the midst of the excited emigrants, from whose lips a cry of surprise and pity, mingled with thanks, issued in low accents.

The fugitive was a young woman scarcely twenty summers of age; and, although her face wore an expression of despair, she was a being of rare and wondrous beauty.

Her eyes were black as midnight, and shaded by long, drooping lashes that gave them a timid and languid expression. Her hair, like her eyes, was black as ebony, and hung in long, flowing tresses to her animal's back.

Her dress, cast of features, complexion and small white hands and tapering fingers were evidence, satisfactory, that she was not a border maid, but a lady—one that had been raised in wealth and refinement. And there was that in her dark eyes and silken hair which satisfied Major Bronson, without considering her complexion, that the blood of a Southern creole—such as were usually met with in Louisiana—coursed her veins.

She was mounted upon a fine-looking animal of the American stock, and when she drew rein it fairly staggered with exhaustion.

The fugitive was the first to speak.

"Are you friends to me—a helpless fugitive?" she asked, in a tone which must have been musical when not rendered harsh by fear and excitement.

"Yes, yes: you can rely upon safety in our camp, young woman," said Major Bronson; "Here, Heyward, assist this young lady to dismount."

Frank Heyward advanced and assisted the fair fugitive to the ground, and giving her animal to one of the servants, he conducted her to camp.

She was tall and queenly, graceful of movement, seeming to float along upon the air by Frank's side.

"How does it come that you are a fugitive, fair lady?" asked young Heyward, when he had seen her seated in camp.

All gathered around her, and in breathless interest listened to her tale of woe.

"Father and I," she said, "in company with two other families, were journeying from a point on the Mississippi river to a settlement on the Missouri. At dawn this morning, just as we broke camp, we were attacked by a band of Indians. I was mounted upon my horse, and slightly in advance of the train when the first shot was fired. I saw father go down under the blow of a tomahawk. His last words were for me to flee. I—"

Here the maiden broke down and sobbed bitterly.

Major Bronson spoke words of cheer to her, and tendered her the heartfelt sympathy of the whole party. He promised to look after her father on the morrow, and if he could not be found, to return her safe to her friends.

"But, kind sir," she moaned, "my father was the only friend I had in the world, that I know of."

"Then I hope you may find him still alive. But what is your name?"

"Mildred Cleveland."

"Cleveland!" exclaimed Bronson. "I had a dear friend once by that name. He lived in Tennessee."

"Father was formerly from that State," replied Mildred, a ray of hope beginning to shine from the liquid depths of her dark eyes.

"From Tennessee!" exclaimed the major.

"Was his name Orville Vane Cleveland?"

"The same."

"Great Heaven! is it thus that I meet the child of my beloved old friend, Orville Vane! Rest assured, Mildred, that you will have a friend and protector in Major Tom Bronson as long as his life-lamp holds out to burn."

"Bronson! I have often heard father speak of Thomas Bronson."

"No doubt of it—no doubt of it," returned the major; "but here, Mildred, is my ward, Miss Dora Barnwell, who will keep you company, and in her society I hope you will find some relief for your bereaved heart."

The major left Dora and Mildred together and alone—the others having already withdrawn—and went to see about strengthening their position against the Indians, who he feared would make a night attack upon their camp.

But the night wore away without any demonstration on the part of the foe.

During the short time they were together, Dora and her companion became strongly attached to each other; as much so, perhaps, as was possible for two of such opposite natures.

Dora was a little, *petite* creature, full of sunshine and merriment. Mildred was tall, graceful and queenly in proportions, with features slightly traced with *hauteur*—just enough, thought Frank Heyward, to enhance her peculiar style of beauty.

A party was sent out in search of Mildred's

father, but after an absence of two days they returned, having found no trace of the unfortunate man nor of any of the party.

Poor Mildred! she gave up all hopes of recovering the remains of her father, and quietly submitted to fate. She accepted Major Tom Bronson's proffered friendship and protection, and on the third day, when the party resumed their journey, Mildred Cleveland went with them.

CHAPTER IV.

DORA'S SURPRISE.

"BEHOLD the promised land!"

This was the exclamation of Major Tom Bronson, as the whole train came to a halt upon the summit of a long range of low hills looking westward for miles and miles.

Before them lay a vast plain whose green bosom was traversed by the Raccoon river and some of its adjuncts. Here and there a tiny lakelet lay slumbering upon the vast expanse, reflecting the sun-rays like mirrors. Groups of deer and prong-horned antelopes could be seen in the distance.

The plain was bounded on the west by the river, on the north by a dense body of timber, and on the east by the range of hills upon which they stood.

"'Tis a grand and beautiful plain," said Frank Heyward. "What say you, Mildred and Dora?"

"My opinion coincides with yours exactly, Mr. Heyward," said the dark-eyed, queenly Mildred.

"And mine, too," added merry-hearted Dora; "but if yonder woods are full of ugly Indians, it might mar the natural beauty of the plain."

"I hope we will have no trouble with the Indians, daughter," said Major Bronson. "We have presents and gold enough to buy their peace and good-will, at least, until our colony becomes strong enough to defy their hostile proclivities."

At this juncture young Heyward noticed that Mildred Cleveland started quickly, and glanced toward the different wagons with an inquiring look.

"What is the matter, Miss Cleveland? You seem agitated," said Frank.

Mildred's face showed no little confusion as she replied:

"I was startled by Mr. Bronson's remark. I heard our guide tell father it was very dangerous traveling through this wild land with money and valuables. The robbers, or prairie-pirates as they call them, are said to be numerous, and if an emigrant-train has any valuables they manage to find it out and get them."

"I hope we will meet with no such loss, for all our earthly possessions, amounting to some thirty thousand dollars, we have with us. To lose it, our colonizing scheme would be ruined."

Again Mildred Cleveland involuntarily ran her eyes over the wagons, and as they wandered from one to the other, stopped when they came to that two-wheeled vehicle with its broad tires and its rude, closed box, as though her fears had singled it out as the treasure-vehicle.

The train now descended into the green, fertile valley, which they crossed to the northwest extremity where the timber reached down to the river. Here, almost upon the banks of the stream, the train halted. It was the point selected by Major Tom for their permanent camp; and it was an admirable one for that purpose, being flanked on all sides by water.

The little water-bound tract of prairie was of a triangular form, the river forming the base; the creek that divided the plain from the woods, the perpendicular; and a large, deep bayou extending from the river diagonally across the plain almost to the creek described the hypotenuse. The narrow space between the creek and the head of the bayou admitted the teams to and from the place.

The Peninsula, as Major Bronson not inappropriately named the triangular tract, was about five acres in area, and of sufficient altitude to escape the periodical overflow of the river, and the malaria so common to the low, wet lands of the river bottoms.

It wanted two hours of sunset when the train reached the Peninsula. The wagons were arranged in a hollow square, inside of which the tents were pitched with more than usual care, for they were not to be moved soon, at least, until cabins were erected.

A new spirit seemed to have been infused into the heart of each one, unless it was that of Mildred, for all felt that this was the beginning of a new life in a new home.

Mildred Cleveland still felt that she was in the midst of strangers, and could not indulge in that social and familiar freedom of those around her; although every one tried to make her feel at home, and as one of the party.

During the short time they had been together, Frank Heyward had been quite attentive to the beautiful fugitive, and more than one believed he had been smitten by her wondrous charms. But be this as it may, it was more readily perceived that his attentions were received with smiles and blushes, which spoke plainer than words—told that she loved Frank.

It did not require much time to go into camp, corral the stock to grass and procure wood for cooking purposes from the adjacent forest.

On the morrow they were to commence building.

The party passed the time in various ways during the evening.

The abundance of fish in the river drew the attention of the boys and they were soon grouped along the bank with rod and line in hand.

The girls wandered at pleasure about the Peninsula, culling the wild flowers that grew in profusion everywhere, while the old folks gathered and laid their plans and made their calculations for the work that was before them.

Mildred Cleveland and Dora Barnwell strolled away alone and seated themselves upon the river-bank at the upper side of the Peninsula.

Here they entered into converse, Dora's voice rippling away in musical notes and merry peals of laughter; while the tall, dark-eyed beauty at her side spoke in a low, soft tone, and smiled half-baughtily at her vivacity and merry-heartedness.

Something besides the loss of her father seem-

ed to make Mildred unhappy and uneasy. Dora was keen of perception, as all women are, and she saw at once that Frank Heyward was the object of her restlessness of heart. She—Mildred—loved him, and yet was in doubt whether her love was in the least reciprocated. This doubt was occasioned from the fact that Frank had been quite frequent in his attentions to Dora herself.

At last Dora said to her:

"Why is it, Mildred, you seem uneasy this evening?"

"Oh, Dora! I have been so very uneasy ever since I learned you had so much money and valuables with you. The prairie-pirates, they say, are more dangerous than the Indians, and have scouts and spies out in all directions."

"I would not let that trouble you, dear Mildred," replied Dora kindly. "Father will see that we are not surprised by an enemy. Are there any prairie-pirates about here that you have heard of, Mildred?"

Mildred hesitated, and turned her dark eyes away to keep from encountering those of her little questioner. The subject, itself, seemed terrifying to her sensitive heart and mind. But seeing Dora did not change the theme of conversation, she finally said:

"Yes, Dora, I heard our guide speak of a band of robbers under the outlaw brothers, called Bodsford. They not only steal horses and plunder emigrant-trains, but make a business of kidnapping young girls and women and selling them to the Indians, or holding them for ransom."

Dora uttered a little cry and would have made reply, but approaching footsteps caused her to desist.

"Pardon my intrusion, ladies, but I could not resist the temptation of your society."

It was Frank Heyward who addressed them. He came near and seated himself by Mildred's side, at the same time making some pleasant remarks about his own impoliteness.

Mildred's eyes glowed with unusual brilliancy, and a deep flush came to her cheeks, which Dora, as well as Frank, himself, did not fail to observe.

Soon Dora framed an excuse, and rising to her feet, left Mildred and Frank alone.

She strolled listlessly along the river-bank, gazing down into the murmuring waters, or plucking the wild flowers that bedecked her path.

Suddenly her eye caught sight of a small canoe, lying half-concealed under the edge of the bank. At first she thought it might contain an occupant who was in the concealed portion of it, but she soon became convinced that such was not the case, when she saw it moving with the gentle pulsations of the water.

Her young spirit of adventure at once became aroused, and she resolved to have a boat-ride upon the river. She was no novice in the use of oars, having been raised on the shores of a little lake where she could have daily access to the boat-house, and row upon the lake, which developed a skill with the oars, and a love for the water.

Without calling any one to her assistance she sprang lightly down the bank and stepped into

the little craft which had evidently drifted there, for it was not made fast.

It was an Indian canoe, made of bark, and about large enough for two persons. In the bottom lay a paddle, so there was nothing wanting to insure the success of the maiden's ride upon the river.

Seating herself, she headed the bark upstream, and skirting the bank for a rod or two, shot abruptly out into the stream directly in front of Frank and Mildred, causing them to start suddenly.

A clear, joyous laugh pealed from Dora's lips on seeing her friends start with surprise, then plying the paddle she sent the little craft flying up the stream.

"Do not venture away too far, Dora," cautioned young Heyward, "or you might get caught by some lurking Indian."

"If there should be but one, Frank," Dora replied, in a playful manner, "I will take him prisoner and bring him to camp. I know you would all like to see a genuine wild Indian."

She used the paddle with remarkable dexterity, and after skimming around near Frank and Mildred for a few moments continued on up the stream.

Young Heyward saw that Mildred watched her movements very closely, as if half-envious of the attention he bestowed upon her; and whenever he spoke in praiseworthy terms of Dora, a smile, in which there was a shadow of jealous envy, played about her pretty red lips.

Dora continued slowly up the river without seeming to notice the distance she was leaving the camp behind her, but watching each shore with a cautious eye.

Suddenly she saw that which arrested her attention with an admiring interest. From the boughs of some low, scrubby trees that stood upon the east shore and were inclined outward over the water, hung a curtain of green vines resembling Spanish moss. Upon the face of this curtain the maiden saw numerous clusters of small white flowers and red berries.

It was a sight very pleasing to the eye of an enthusiastic maiden, and Dora at once headed her canoe inshore, with the intention of procuring a cluster of the berries and flowers, to carry back to camp as a trophy of her adventure.

It required but a few strokes of the oar to carry the canoe before, and within reach of the green facade of creepers and parasitical vines that hung to the water's surface and concealed the shore beyond.

Dora rose to her feet and reached out for the nearest cluster of berries, but in so doing the canoe rocked slightly and the paddle fell overboard. Before she could make an attempt to recover it, it was carried beyond her reach.

This was quite a misfortune, as she was out of sight of her friends, there being an abrupt bend in the stream below.

She could go ashore where she was, but then the river would be between her and her friends.

"What should she do?—what *could* she do?"

She had scarcely asked herself these questions when she detected a slight rustling in the green foliage before her.

She started and grasping the vines for support, listened intently. She could still hear a

slight rustling in the drapery of vines before her, such as would be made by the movement of a huge serpent.

Dora grew alarmed, and almost paralyzed with fear, felt certain that she had got herself into trouble, and was in the act of calling for help when she saw the flash of something red through the vines upon which the setting sun was streaming. The next instant the selvage of the green drapery was parted, and a pair of black, scintillating orbs peered through upon her.

Dora attempted to cry out, but terror held her speechless.

Then the vines were parted wider and the plumed head and grim, triumphant face of an Indian warrior appeared in the opening.

CHAPTER V.

WHOSE WAS THE BODY.

SLOWLY, and with all his natural precaution, Keen Knife approached the lifeless form that lay covered under the leaves. He felt satisfied that it was the body of Bold-Heart, yet he did not let this belief blind his precaution, for fear of some trap.

When he reached the body he raked the leaves therefrom with the muzzle of his rifle, and a cry of triumph pealed from his lips when he saw it was the body of a Sioux warrior, with a bullet-hole through his forehead.

The dead savage was unscalped. This convinced Rob's red friend that he had been slain by Bold-Heart, who had either made good his escape or been captured. The latter appeared the most probable, else the warriors would have carried their dead comrade with them.

However, the young Indian resolved to wait till midnight, and then if Bold-Heart did not meet him at the appointed place, he would go in search of him. So turning, he began retracing his footsteps down the river, moving with great rapidity, yet with the most extreme silence, close along the shore.

He had traversed over two miles, when his keen ear suddenly caught the dip of a paddle.

Peering out upon the river, he saw a small canoe, with a single occupant—a beautiful white girl.

Creeping closer to the edge of the river, he concealed himself within the deep shadows of a clump of vines, to watch the fair, sylph-like creature.

Much to his surprise, she turned her canoe and came directly toward him.

Like a grim statue he sat and feasted his eyes upon her, for she was a being of extreme loveliness.

She came near him—within arm's length—only a curtain of trailing vines separated them.

Allowing her canoe to stand still, she arose to her feet as though she were going to leap ashore, but instead of so doing, she reached upward toward a cluster of scarlet berries on the vines.

The movement caused her canoe to rock slightly, and her paddle slipped overboard.

Disappointment was written upon her sweet young face, and she gazed around her like one in trouble.

Keen-Knife felt satisfied that she belonged to

the party of emigrants spoken of by Bold-Heart, and so he resolved to release her from her dilemma.

He arose to his feet, and that he might not frighten her, he carefully parted the vines and made his presence known.

The sight of him seemed to fill the maiden with terror, seeing which, Keen-Knife said:

"Let the pale-face maiden fear not. I am Keen-Knife, the friend of the white man."

Dora Barnwell breathed freer, yet it was several moments before she had regained her composure to speak.

"If you are a friend," she at length asked, "why have you come upon me so noiselessly?"

A grim smile swept over the Indian's face as he replied:

"I was here before you came. But if you mistrust me, return to your friends and tell them Keen-Knife, the white man's friend, desires an interview with them."

"But I have dropped my paddle in the river," Dora replied.

The Indian quickly withdrew, and Dora heard his footsteps hurrying down the stream.

In a few moments he returned, and handed her the truant ashen blade.

Dora thanked him kindly, adding:

"This act of kindness, red-man, removes all doubt from my mind of your friendliness. If you like, you can take a seat in my canoe and go with me to my friends. I have heard of Keen-Knife, the Prince of the Prairies, before."

Keen-Knife made no reply, but leaped lightly into the canoe. Seating himself, he took the paddle from Dora's hand, and headed the bark down the stream.

Dora could not help admiring his rude gallantry, as well as his noble form, dark eyes, and long, flowing hair. He was a noble specimen of manhood.

In the mean time, those at the camp had begun to grow uneasy about Dora's protracted absence, when all at once, Major Bronson discovered the canoe rounding the bend of the river.

"By Heavens!" he exclaimed, "there comes Dora now, and as I live, there's an Indian with her!"

"She has kept her word then," said Frank, "and has captured an Indian. He must be friendly; what think you, Mildred?"

Mildred fixed her dark eyes upon the approaching Indian, and Frank saw that her cheeks grew pale, and that her lips quivered with emotion, as she replied:

"Yes, it must be a friendly—probably the noted Keen-Knife, of whom you have heard, perhaps."

"Yes, I have heard of Keen-Knife, Prince of the Prairie; the white man's friend."

At this moment the canoe touched upon the shore, and the occupants landed.

A shout of joy pealed from the emigrants' lips when they learned who the Indian was.

Major Bronson conducted the young Prince to his own tent, and proceeded to question him, while Dora gave a pleasant account of her adventure to her friends.

"Are you well acquainted with the country, and the dangers hereabouts, Keen-Knife?" asked

the major of his guest, after they had conversed awhile.

"I have hunted and trapped here for many long months," replied the Indian. "There is no watercourse but what I have followed, no path but what my feet have pressed. You are in great danger, for the Sioux are on the war-path, and the dark-browed man at the Lone Estate furnishes them with fire-water to make them mad and crazy for white blood."

"What do you mean by the Lone Estate?"

"It is the place where a pale-face lives, with many black slaves. He is a bad man, and consorts with the Sioux and many white Indians."

"Does he live alone with his slaves?"

"No. There are white women there."

"Did you ever see them?"

"I was never at Lone Estate. It would be death for me to go there. But Bold-Heart saw one to-day, fair as the rose upon the plain."

"And who is Bold-Heart?"

"A white friend of mine."

"Where is he now?"

"I know not, but at midnight he promised to meet me in the forest, not far away."

"Then he has been to the Lone Estate, has he?"

"He has; and to-day he talked with the daughter of the dark-browed man."

Major Tom started, and an anxious light beamed in his steel-gray eyes.

"Keen-Knife," he asked, "will you do me a favor by bringing your friend to our camp? I want to see him on important business."

"Keen-Knife will tell Bold-Heart what the chief of the pale-faces desires," replied the Indian.

"I will reward you well for your services, young man; but if you are not to meet Bold-Heart until midnight, you will remain with us till then, will you not? You shall occupy this tent if you so decide."

"Keen-Knife is the friend of the pale-face. He never sleeps when there's danger around. I will watch over your camp till it is time to go and meet my friend."

"You're a noble fellow, Keen-Knife—" began the major, but before he could conclude his sentence, Keen-Knife had glided from the tent, and when he next saw him, he was carefully inspecting the situation of the camp.

CHAPTER VI.

WHAT KEEN-KNIFE SAW.

No one watched the movements of Keen-Knife more closely than did Mildred. The sight of the Indian seemed to fill her with fear, and although Frank noticed the Friendly fix his gaze upon her more than once with a strange, admiring expression, he never permitted his dark eyes to meet those of the fair, queenly maiden.

Before nightfall, a number of guards were posted at different points, and Keen-Knife promised the major that he would keep on the scout around the Peninsula until midnight.

With a double assurance of safety while the noted young Prince of the Prairie watched over them, the emigrants retired early to bed. Before he left, Keen-Knife had promised to report

their situation to the major, who was then to station a new set of guards.

The night was one of extreme darkness and silence. Nothing save the coruscations of the fire-flies could be seen, and only a few sounds peculiar to the northern night could be heard away off in the wilderness.

Keen-Knife had disappeared from sight after nightfall as if by magic. But the guards, now and then caught sight of a shadowy form flitting about from place to place, and they felt satisfied of its being the young Indian.

As the hours wore on, a low, half-stifled cry suddenly pealed out on the still night air, causing the guards to start with alarm. It was a cry as of human agony. But it was not repeated. A silence that was more intense than ever now ensued.

Half an hour later, Keen-Knife, crouching under the edge of the river-bank, caught sight of an object that deeply arrested his attention.

It was a dull speck of fire floating on the river close along the eastern shore, apparently at the will of the current. It was about the size of a small bird's egg, and had it been in the woods, Keen-Knife would have taken no particular notice of it, for there, after night, he had often met with such objects commonly known among the hunters and old woodmen as fox-fire, a piece of fungus or decayed wood. But its being upon the surface of the stream aroused his native curiosity, and he resolved to inquire into the object when it came nearer.

But just at the moment when he would have done so, his acute ear caught the sound of a light footstep on the bank below him. He turned his head and was not a little surprised to see a figure wrapped in a blanket or gown, standing on the bank, plainly outlined against the starry sky, and seemingly magnified into a being of colossal stature.

The Indian scarcely breathed, so silent did he remain and watch the giant, shrouded form.

Finally it moved down the bank to the water's edge and paused a few paces below where he lay concealed.

The dull speck of fire floating on the water seemed to arrest the attention of the shrouded figure, and when it came nearer, the figure knelt down—put out a hand and lifted it from the stream.

Keen-Knife could scarcely restrain his silence longer, but curbing his anxiety with that true Indian patience, he waited and watched.

He saw the shrouded figure, still kneeling, draw the dark blanket over its head closer and remain in that position several minutes, during which time the Indian caught the vivid flash of a light between the edges of the blanket.

At last it arose and tossed the glowing object out into the river again, then turned and moved back from the river.

Keen-Knife watched the stealthy form, and saw it disappear among the tents of the emigrants' camp. What did it all mean? What mystery was hanging over the encampment?

Keen-Knife now turned his attention to the floating object again. In the middle of the current, it was being carried quite rapidly down the stream, and went gliding along so that it would have appeared to a casual observer more

like the coruscation of a fire-fly than aught else. Stealing swiftly along the bank to the mouth of the bayou, the Indian quickly threw aside his outer clothing, with the determination of taking to the river to secure that mysterious object.

He laid aside all his weapons but his hunting-knife. This he placed between his teeth, and stepping into the stream, was soon swimming out toward the object.

So silently did he move that he scarcely stirred a ripple upon the smooth bosom of the river. He swam upon his back, and only his face was visible above the water—even that seemed like an inanimate thing floating with the current.

The wily youth had almost reached the glowing object when a small, circling wave, followed by another and another, dashed over his face and caused him to raise his head slightly.

His fears were instantly aroused. He knew those tiny wavelets had been caused by some living thing in the water, for not a breath of air was stirring.

Carefully he turned himself and glanced along the surface of the stream.

The glowing object he saw was within arm's reach of him. He put out his hand to seize it, but at this instant he beheld a pair of dull glowing orbs just beyond, and a dusky human hand upraised in the same attitude as his own, and no doubt for the same purpose.

It required but an instant for Keen-Knife to comprehend all. The savage, for such the young Prince recognized him to be, was there to intercept the floating object after it had passed through the hands of the shrouded figure at the camp.

Keen-Knife grasped his knife and dashing forward, grappled with the foe.

There was a quick floundering in the water, a low, gurgling moan, then all became silent as the grave again.

A few minutes later a figure crept from the river and stood erect where the white man's friend had first taken to the water.

It was Keen-Knife himself. In one hand he held a reeking scalp in the other he held a small object that glowed like a coal of fire.

What was the object? Keen-Knife examined it closely.

It was simply a small glass bottle, corked airtight. Within it was a small bit of phosphorus and a slip of white paper—nothing more.

Donning his clothes, the young Prince of the Prairies swept the sky with a quick gaze as if to read the hour of night by the stars.

Then he turned and retraced his footsteps to camp.

He proceeded at once to the tent occupied by Major Bronson. He found him up with a light in his apartment.

"Well, how do matters stand, Keen-Knife?" the old man asked.

In a triumphant and significant manner the young Indian tapped his girdle, where the major beheld two scalps dangling.

"Then there have been Indians about," he said, fairly shuddering at sight of the reeking objects, yet aiming to conceal his disgust.

"Yes," returned Keen-Knife, "let the gray-haired chief of the pale-faces be on his guard. His whole band is in danger. And I must leave

now. The stars point close to the hour of midnight. When I have met my young friend, Bold-Heart, then will I come back."

"Do so by all means!" exclaimed the major.

"Keen-Knife will be as good as his word, but here is something for the white man. I took it from the river when it glowed like fire," said the youth, handing the major the mysterious bottle.

Major Tom examined it with no little surprise, although the light of his lamp dimmed the glow of the phosphorus within it.

"There is a bit of phosphorus and a white paper within it," said the major, holding the bottle up to the light.

"Then let the white man take it out and read it. Were it the writing of the Great Spirit on the trees, the wind or the clouds, then could Keen-Knife read it. But the silent talk of the pale-faces is darkness to me. But now I will leave the camp of the pale-faces, and as a parting injunction let me say to the pale-face chief, beware! *there is a traitor in his camp!*"

Major Bronson started up to confront Keen-Knife. But Keen-Knife was gone—he had vanished from the tent like a shadow, and the major stood alone with his excited thoughts.

CHAPTER VII.

IN A DILEMMA.

AT the hour of midnight, Keen-Knife was at the place appointed for his meeting with Rob Radcliff, the Boy Hunter. But to his surprise and regret the youth was not there, and his absence now convinced him that he was either dead or a captive.

He waited an hour or more, hoping he might yet come. The moon had arisen, and flooded the forest and prairie with its soft, yellow beams.

Keen-Knife was not long in deciding upon his next course. He would go at once in search of Bold-Heart.

Gliding from the covert, he crept away directly north. In a few minutes he paused just within the thicket that skirted the Lone Estate.

The great opening lay like an island, bathed in the mellow light of the moon.

Carefully he swept its bosom as far as his vision would reach, but all was like a blank, wrapped in the stillness of the midnight hour.

No—all was not silence either. While Keen-Knife stood there within the thicket, he suddenly heard the quick, heavy tread of a foot which he knew wore no moccasin. It was a booted foot.

The next instant a man wrapped in a long, dark cloak, emerged from the forest into the moonlit opening. He paused and glanced warily around him, then strode on toward the cabins of Manuel La Mort.

Keen-Knife started at sight of him. He recognized him at once, for he caught sight of the face when he gazed around him. *It was the face of Frank Heyward!* And Keen-Knife was positive that his form was the same that had stolen to the water's edge and intercepted the floating bottle. But he was not the one whom the Friendly had mistrusted as being the traitor of whom he had warned the major.

The Indian was sorely tempted to follow Heyward and see where he went to; but he knew he would have great difficulty in doing so; besides, he would be neglecting his friend, Bold-Heart, who might, at that instant, be in need of his aid. If he was a captive, it was more than likely he had been carried to the Indian village, in case he had not been placed in the power of Don La Mort, and so Keen-Knife at once shaped his course toward the Indian stronghold.

This was situated many miles north of the Lone Estate, yet the young Prince knew he could make the point long before daylight, and under cover of the darkness make such inspections as would satisfy him, beyond a doubt, of Bold-Heart's whereabouts.

Deep in the heart of a dense forest, the village of Inkpaducab, the Sioux chief, was located. It was flanked upon the east side by the Racoon river, and on the north by a range of hills, whose steep facade defied ascent or descent. The other two sides were a level tract of deep, dense woods, admitting of an easy approach to the town, so far as natural obstacles were concerned.

It was nearly daylight when Keen-Knife hove in sight of the village, which he approached from the south.

With all the silence he could master, the Indian crept toward the town. He found it silent in slumber. Only the dying embers of a number of camp-fires marked the exact location of the place.

How was the young Prince to gain the information he desired, now that he was at the outskirts of the town? It could be obtained only at risk of his life by entering the village, but this he resolved to do. Like a shadow he crept onward until the footsteps of a sentinel caused him to pause, and reconnoiter, with eye and ear, his situation.

Not over an arm's length from him he saw a grim, shadowy form standing in the attitude of intense listening. It was a savage guard, and the slightest sound had riveted his attention, and put every faculty on the alert.

Keen-Knife grasped the haft of his tomahawk and with one sweep he buried the weapon in the savage's brain.

Only a low moan escaped the doomed sentinel's lips as he fell to the earth a lifeless mass.

Waiting until he was certain that the sound had not been heard, the youth crept on. But soon he found another guard directly in his path, from which there was no deviating.

The savage was seated upon a fallen log where the moon's rays fell partially upon him, and where it would be impossible to pass him unobserved.

The log upon which he sat was about fifty feet in length, and lay parallel with the course Keen-Knife was pursuing. Its ends were both concealed from the savage's view by clumps of bushes.

The wary red-skin sat near the middle of the log, while the Prince crouched down at the south end to watch his movements and take him when off his guard.

But this opportunity was not likely to be afforded soon, for the eyes of the savage were on a constant move.

Crouching lower to escape discovery, Keen-Knife saw that the log was hollow—he could see the glow of the dying camp-fire through the opening far beyond.

A thought struck the Friendly. Why not crawl through the log and thus pass the guard?

The thought was no sooner formed in his mind than he proceeded to carry it into execution. He laid aside his rifle and tomahawk and such clothing as would diminish his size, then with his knife between his teeth, he crept softly into the log. The end that he entered was the smallest, and as he advanced he found the hollow gradually increased in size, so that he had no trouble in making his way along.

He crawled slowly and with all the silence of a serpent, keeping his eyes fixed on the opening before him, through which he could still see the glow of the fading camp-fire.

He had crept along more than half the length of the log, when he saw the opening before him suddenly closed up as if by magic. Some dark form had entered it. There was no doubt of this; the Friendly could hear and feel the faint vibratory touch of the moving creature—whatever it was.

Keen-Knife was now in the horn of a dilemma, as well as a hollow log, from which there were little hopes of a safe escape.

The form was still approaching—now so near that he could see the dull glow of the eyes, and feel the breath in his face!

CHAPTER VIII.

AN EXCHANGE OF PRISONERS.

RETREAT was the only resort for the Prince; but he would have sacrificed his scalp rather than retreat before a single enemy. It would have been a reflection upon his hitherto spotless courage and manhood, and nerving himself, he seized his knife in a firm gripe.

But if it was an enemy, why would he venture into the log to confront him? It seemed a little strange—nay, mysterious.

Then he suddenly remembered that the outlaw brothers made their headquarters at the Indian village, and that Death-Trail kept a number of fierce bloodhounds, and might not the form before him be that of one of those terrible beasts?

But whatever it was, it suddenly ceased its approach, having, evidently, discovered the presence of the Prince before it.

Two pairs of dull, glowing orbs now glared upon each other with unwavering glances—two beings possessed of life were in doubt as to what each other was.

But suddenly a savage yell, mingled with the baying of hounds, broke the silence of the hour. The sound came from the village, and intonations told of excitement and baffled triumph. Higher rose the yells as the savages rushed from their couches and joined in the confusion. Then the bounds of Death-Trail gave tongue as though they were starting upon a trail.

"God of mercy! the lopin' devils have discovered my escape!" were the words that suddenly fell upon the ears of Keen-Knife.

They issued from the lips of the being in the log before him. He recognized the voice with a thrill of joy.

"Bold-Heart," he said, in a low tone.

"Thank God! it's you, Keen-Knife!"

"Yes," replied the Indian. "Follow me, Bold-Heart. The Sioux and Death-Trail's hounds will find us here."

"Yes, quick, quick, Prince! I would never have entered this log after I had escaped, but to elude the guard seated upon it. Ah! the accursed knaves are at the end of the log now!"

With remarkable rapidity Keen-Knife retreated from the log, closely followed by his friend, Rob Radcliff.

Grasping his weapons and clothing from where he had cast them, the young Prince glided away into the dense shrubbery. Rob started to follow him, but, before he had gone three steps he fell to the earth under the blow of a club in the hand of the outlaw, Tim Bodsford.

Then with yells of triumph, a hundred savages gathered around the prostrate youth.

Keen-Knife paused in his retreat when he comprehended the misfortune of his friend.

Above the savages' yells he heard Death-Trail calling his hounds back to the village. This convinced him that his presence had not been discovered.

With the half-unconscious Bold-Heart, the Indians retired to the village.

In a few minutes new camp-fires were twinkling all over the town, and from his covert Keen-Knife saw the savages gather in council. He knew well what it meant—Bold-Heart's fate was to be decided on at once.

Foremost in the council was Tim Bodsford and his brother, Death-Trail.

Every conceivable mode of torture, almost, was spoken of and commented upon by the savages; but their vindictive ingenuity could not invent a punishment for Bold-Heart, of a severity sufficient to satiate their devilish thirst for revenge. At last, Tim Bodsford suggested a torture that was received with a shout of approbation by all.

It was to skin Bold Heart alive!

This fearful torture was postponed until daylight, and a strong guard set over the captive. Day, however, soon came, and to Tim Bodsford was given the lead in the preparations for the torture.

Great excitement prevailed—a gala-day was anticipated by the red barbarians; and when the guard, slain and scalped by Keen-Knife, was found, new fuel was added to the flame of their wrath.

With some thirty men, Tim Bodsford retired to the woods shortly after sunrise, and soon returned bearing a long, half-decayed log with them.

They deposited the log near the center of the square, then Bodsford ordered the captive brought out.

Bold-Heart was led forth bound hand and foot, yet betraying no fear by look nor word. His step was firm and his face wore an expression of fearlessness and courage. He was thrown rudely across the log and bound in such a position as would soon bring death itself.

Bodsford now announced that all was ready for the torture to begin, and with yells and howls of fiendish delight, the warriors, squaws

and children gathered around to witness the sufferings of the Boy Hunter.

Inkpaducab, the head chief, with his little son, Appanoosah, the future chief of his tribe, a child of some five years, took his stand near the large end of the log where they could command a fair view of the torture.

Tim Bodsford, with sleeves rolled up, and knife in hand advanced toward the doomed pale-face, feeling the keen edge of his weapon as he went.

He reached the log and stooped to begin the work of torture, but at the same instant he fell dead with a tomahawk quivering in his brain.

"Keen-Knife! Keen-Knife!"

The words burst from the lips of the old chief, for he alone saw the form of the young Prince of the Prairies rise, as if by magic, from the earth at his feet, and hurl the weapon at the outlaw's head.

"Keen-Knife! Keen-Knife!" chorused a hundred throats.

But with his peculiar and terrifying war-cry, Keen-Knife turned, and seizing the child of Inkpaducab by the heels, threw it over his shoulder and dashed away like a deer.

A glance showed the chief from whence the youth had come. The log was hollow, and in it he had been carried into the heart of the village by Bodsford and the savages.

Though feeble with the weight of years, the old chief bounded away in swift pursuit of the cunning foe, calling loudly on his warriors to follow.

Little Appanoosah set up a fearful scream, and struggled like a young panther, but his captor held him firm, and ran on at a marvelous speed that defied any pursuer.

He ran directly toward the river, and there the savages expected to head him off, and scattered out to the right and left to keep him from turning up or down the stream.

A hundred rifles were raised time and again upon the daring young Indian, but each time lowered. They dared not fire, for the cunning fugitive covered his body with the child of the chief.

On toward the river he ran. A canoe was moored upon its banks, and without slackening his speed, he leaped into the craft. The impetus of the bound carried the little bark out from the shore, and drove it clear across to the opposite bank.

Leaping ashore, Keen-Knife turned, and holding the child up between him and his pursuers, uttered a fierce, defiant yell.

Again a hundred rifles were leveled upon him, but the cry of Inkpaducab stayed the fire, for the child as well as his captor, would have been riddled with bullets.

"Let the cowardly Sioux fire if they would slay the cub of their chief," exclaimed Keen-Knife, defiantly.

The savages rushed frantically up and down the bank, and some plunged into the water and began swimming across.

"Call your dogs of warriors back, chief," continued the young Prince; "call them back if you would save the life of your child. The moment a warrior sets foot upon this shore, the boy chief shall die!"

He drew his knife as he concluded, and raised it over the child, as if to give emphasis to his words.

Full well Inkpaducah knew the foe with which he had to deal, and at once recalled his warriors from the river; and then in a low tone, inaudible to Keen-Knife, he addressed them. Their rage and cries at once became stayed; and with the river between them, the hundred fierce warriors stood gazing in silence upon the single youthful foe who had baffled them.

"'Tis well the chief recalled his braves," said our hero, "or his child would now be food for the hounds of Death-Trail."

Although fifty yards of water separated them, Keen-Knife could see the scowl of vengeance, mingled with paternal anxiety and fear, upon the chief's face.

"Let Keen-Knife release the child of Inkpaducah, then shall he depart in peace," said the chief.

A grim, scornful smile swept over the face of the young prince.

"Does Inkpaducah think Keen-Knife a coward? He defies the Sioux to take him, with the child of the chief alive."

"But the hounds of the Death-Trail know Keen-Knife from the child whose hand has given them meat," replied the chief, with a malicious smile of triumph.

"You threaten me with the fangs of Death-Trail's hounds. When they tear the flesh of Keen-Knife, his scalping-knife will have drank the blood of Appanoosah. But when you set at liberty the young pale-face in your camp, then shall you have your child unharmed."

The face of the chief grew brighter, and had our hero been nearer him, he might have seen a smile in which there was a hidden meaning, move his lips; but from the silence that prevailed, the youth knew his old brain was hatching some plot to capture him as well as secure his child. At last he turned to one of his warriors, and addressed him in a low tone.

Then the warrior turned and moved away toward the village, and in a few moments returned with Rob Radcliff, the Boy Hunter.

The chief now turned to Keen-Knife and said:

"The Boy Hunter shall be released. Let Keen-Knife return the child of the chief and take the pale-face away."

"The old Sioux chief is a fool," returned Keen-Knife, contemptuously; "does he think Keen-Knife will run into the power of his cowardly varlets?"

The Indians scowled fiercely at the defiant youth.

"What, then, does the sneaking boy want?" asked the chief.

"Want you to send your braves all back to the village, then will I bring your child and take Bold-Heart away."

Defeat was written upon the face of the chief and his warriors, and for a moment an outbreak of vengeance seemed imminent. But that deep, paternal love for his offspring soon mastered the old chief's emotions of a hostile character, and he ordered his warriors to fall back to the village.

Keen-Knife watched their sullen retreat, and saw them take a position in the village, ready to

dart forward at an instant signal. The youth knew that they intended deviltry, but nevertheless he determined to improve the moment for Bold-Heart's release.

With the child of the chief he entered the canoe, and in a few moments he was upon the opposite shore. It required but an instant to pass the child to his father and for Rob Radcliff to leap into the canoe; but at the same instant a wild, savage yell rent the still morning air, and the whole band of Inkpaducah came pouring toward the river.

Before they reached the bank, however, the youth had put the stream between them, and with a yell of defiance sped away into the woods. But they had not gone far when they happened to glance back. They saw that a number of the foe had crossed the river and were in hot pursuit.

Deep into the dark and almost impenetrable shadows of the woods the youths sped on—on where it would have been difficult for the savage foe to follow.

But hark! what sound is that comes echoing through the woods!

Ah! 'tis the hounds of Death-Trail giving tongue, and they are close upon the track of the fugitives.

CHAPTER IX.

FRANK HEYWARD MISSING.

"A TRAITOR in camp!"

Major Bronson repeated the words, time and again. He could scarcely think it possible that Keen-Knife's assertion was true, unless the Indian was the traitor himself. But, such a thought he could not entertain, in justice to his own conscience. It was true the Indian was eccentric to one unaccustomed to his ways, but from the time they had set foot within the borders of the territory, he had heard Keen-Knife spoken of as immovable in his fidelity to the whites.

In fact there were none upon whom the major could fix suspicion. Not one of the emigrants besides himself and Frank Heyward had ever been within the Territory, nor within a hundred miles of it until their coming with the colony. And he could as easily have suspected his little ward, Dora Barnwell, or Mildred Cleveland of the crime as Frank Heyward. No, there must be some mistake, or else the Indian was simply aiming to work upon his fears to keep him on the alert for danger.

"But let me see," he finally said to himself, "perhaps the paper in this bottle will furnish a clue to the matter in question."

He sat down near the lamp, uncorked the bottle and extracted the little roll of paper therefrom.

"Now," he continued to himself, as he unfolded the paper, "if Keen-Knife's words were true, this bottle and paper must have been thrown into the river by that traitor, who trusted to the current to carry it to some accomplice down the river. And the Indian must have seen him toss the bottle into the stream, hence his suspicion. But I'll see what the paper says."

The paper unfolded, he held it close to the light, and saw written thereon, in a bold hand,

with a lead pencil, a number of words which ran thus:

"Look sharp! Reached the place to-day. We've two beautiful girls and thirty thousand dollars in camp. Keen-Knife is here on the alert. Wait till I communicate again before attacking the camp. It may be we can get the girls and money without running much risk. F. H."

A muttered exclamation burst from the lips of Major Bronson, not through surprise at the contents of the paper, as the initials of the writer, "F. H." They were those of his beloved young friend, Frank Heyward, but the handwriting was evidently disguised. And who knew better than Frank did the amount of money in the camp? The two beautiful girls referred to were Dora and Mildred, and a groan of agony burst from the old man's lips when he thought of the dangers to which those innocent maidens were exposed.

"I will go this moment," he said to himself, "arouse them from their sleep, and warn them of their danger. Then I will go straight to Frank and show him this paper. Suspicion points to him although I would rather find him dead than to learn that he is the traitor, and has decoyed me and others here to rob us. God forbid!"

The old man arose, and leaving his tent made his way to that of Dora and Mildred. They were asleep, but he awoke them and bade both dress and hurry to his tent.

In obedience to his wish they were soon there.

"What do you want, father?" asked Dora.

"Oh, you must be sick, you're so very pale."

"No, no, children," he said, in his familiar manner of speaking. "We are all in danger—you girls in particular."

A little cry pealed from Dora's lips, and Mildred turned pale as death.

"Keen-Knife told me there was a traitor in our camp," continued the major, "and here is a paper which he found in a bottle on the river. It is a communication from that traitor, whoever he is, to some one outside of our camp."

Then the major read the letter, omitting the initials.

Again Dora uttered a little cry, and the stately Mildred fairly staggered under the shock the news gave her sensitive nerves.

"Oh, father! who do you think the traitor is?" asked Dora.

"I cannot say, Dora. I have had such perfect confidence in every man, woman and child in this band that it seems impossible one of them could be guilty of such a crime. However, I'll investigate the matter fast as possible, and in the mean time let me caution you, children, about wandering away from the camp. No telling what danger may be lurking about the place. Now go to your tent, implore the protection of the Divine power, and try and rest easy. Good-night, girls."

When they were gone the major rested his face on his hand, and for a moment a desperate struggle seemed raging within his breast. A heavy sigh now and then told of his agony of spirit that seemed to convulse his powerful frame.

Finally he arose to his feet and throwing a cloak around his shoulders, said to himself:

"Yes, I will go to Frank with the letter and demand an explanation. If he is the traitor, the presence of the letter will be undeniable evidence."

He went out and proceeded slowly toward Frank Heyward's tent. Arrived there he tapped lightly on the flap door.

There was no response.

"Frank," he called.

Still no response.

"Frank Heyward?"

No response yet, and with a cry of surprise the major rushed into the tent.

But it was empty. Frank was gone, and his absence forced upon Major Bronson the terrible conviction that Frank Heyward was the traitor!

CHAPTER X.

THE PRAIRIE PIRATES.

A PARTY of ten horsemen were moving westward over the plain near the close of the same day that the emigrants went into camp on the Peninsula.

The leader of the band was a man of some thirty years of age, of medium build and fine, commanding proportions. He might have been called handsome had it not been for the hard, bold expression of the dark, flashing eyes, and the sensual bearded mouth. He was dressed in a flashy suit of velveteen, with a jaunty cap and feather, and high-topped boots upon which jingled a pair of silver rowels.

His companions were dressed and painted like Indians, yet it was easy to be seen that they were white men. This was not only observable from the contour of their features, but the manner in which they sat their animals. In fact, it would have been an easy matter for one accustomed to the prairies to have also recognized them as a band of prairie pirates.

They were headed directly toward the Lone Estate, and ere the sun went down, they drew rein before the door of the pretentious cabin of Manuel La Mort.

The leader hastily dismounted, and his example was followed by his companions.

A troop of negroes and half-breed Indians came swarming from the adjacent cabins, and took their horses, while the freebooters were conducted into the cabin, where they were met by La Mort.

"Ah, my good Rubal Ryan," said he, to the leader of the outlaws, "you are on time, as usual."

"Always, Manuel," returned the outlaw chief; "but, by my soul, old fellow, what ails your eyes? One would think, the pious, temperate Don La Mort was a regular whisky mug, judging from your optics."

"Be seated, men, be seated," returned La Mort; "never mind my eyes. The cursed whelp that struck me is having a foretaste of fire and steel by this time in the Sioux village."

"To whom do you allude?" queried Rubal Ryan.

"To Bold-Heart, the Boy Hunter."

"Bravo!" shouted the pirate captain, "and I would give considerable if they could catch that infernal Keen-Knife, also."

"It's hard catching the devil's own," retorted La Mort.

"Yes, good Manuel, or you and I would have been caught, long, long ago."

An outburst of laughter followed the truthful remark.

"Full of your wit as ever, Rubal," said La Mort, "but not changing the subject, how did your emigrant ruse work?"

"Like a charm, Manuel, like a charm."

"Good!" ejaculated La Mort: "now, gentlemen, we'll have a bottle of my best 'enthusiasm' over it, after which I shall see to sending some dispatches down the river, then entertain you further."

He ordered bottle of whisky and glasses, which he placed on the table before his guests, with whom he drank freely, then left the apartment.

Down under some willows by the river-bank he met three Indians—evil-looking fellows—to whom he addressed some instructions; then giving one of them a small glass bottle, with additional instructions as to its use, he returned to the house, while the Indians crept away down the river.

La Mort did not rejoin his guests on entering the cabin, but, continuing along the narrow hall, entered a room to the right.

The apartment was neatly and comfortably furnished, and bore evidence of feminine delicacy and handiwork. A rich carpet was upon the floor, and the walls were covered with some woven hangings of a rich and harmonious color. Here and there was arranged a bouquet of wild-flowers, that diffused delicious odor through the room. A musical instrument, upon the chords of which the fairy fingers of the evening zephyrs were lightly playing, lay upon the window-sill, and near it sat a young female, whose form was almost blended with the twilight shadows that were stealing into the room.

It was Camilla La Mort, the fair maiden with whom Bold-Heart had met that day on the edge of the glade, and with whom he had been overheard in converse by her father.

Her eyes were red with weeping, for her parent had reproached her angrily and with threats of punishment, for her meeting with the Boy Hunter. He accused her of plotting against his life, and forbade her going beyond the confines of her room without his consent.

And now, as he entered the apartment where she sat weeping, she turned her eyes to elude the fierce gaze he fastened upon her.

"I hope my truant daughter," the villain said, "feels better, and that by this time your conscience has upbraided you for the course pursued to-day."

"I regret nothing I have done," replied Camilla, bitterly.

"Well, it makes but little difference to me, since I propose to be master of this ranch, and have my will obeyed. And now I will tell you what I came in for: Rubal Ryan has returned, and within the next three days you will prepare to become his wife."

"Father! would you have me wed an outlaw?" the maiden cried.

"I would have you marry Rubal Ryan, no matter whether he is priest or pirate. The safe-

ty of the Lone Estate is owing to him and his men, and in lieu of his services he demands your hand, and his desire *shall be gratified*."

The villain turned and left the room, slamming the door to after him and locking it.

Poor Camilla! She threw herself upon a sofa and wept and sobbed as though her heart would break.

La Mort rejoined the prairie pirates, and then began a night of carouse that lasted until most of them had fallen to the floor in a drunken sleep. La Mort and Rubal Ryan alone remained awake at the hour of midnight. In fact, they had imbibed less freely than the white Indians, taking care not to swallow too much of the liquid poison, for during the night they expected some important dispatches from the emigrants' camp on the Peninsula.

To pass the lagging moments, the two revelers indulged in cards and dice, taking an occasional "draw" from a bottle that sat near.

At last La Mort broke out:

"Curse the stupid dolts, they've had time to go twice to the camp and back."

"It may be they've gone there and are unable to get back," replied Ryan. "If that lynx-eyed Keen-Knife is there, ten to one your spy will get entrapped."

"Time will tell, but I'll swear I hate to lose this night. We ought to have been at work hours ago, and not give the emigrants time to fortify themselves, or they might give us trouble."

"Very true," responded the pirate chief.

The hours wore on and the red streaks of dawn were seen in the eastern sky. Still the messengers had not returned, and La Mort was going off in a fit of rage and fury, when a step sounded in the hall.

"Ah, the snails have come," he said, and rising and opening the door, he admitted a small Indian half-breed, whose whole being was the embodiment of subtle cunning.

"Where are Cule and Joht, Snake?" asked La Mort, with a savage frown.

"Dead, master, dead," replied Snake.

"Dead?" exclaimed La Mort.

"Dead," repeated the half-breed. "The white man's friend, Keen-Knife, slew them."

"Fiends and furies!" raved La Mort, "and how does it come that you ever got back with your scalp, Snake?"

"The Snake is too cunning for Keen-Knife. He was within the confines of the emigrants' camp and came out again safe."

"What was you doing in their camp?"

"Went to meet the Spy, for Keen-Knife found the bottle on the river after it had left the Spy's hands with the dispatch."

"Ah, you're a cunning dog, Snake. Now tell me whether you met the Spy in the emigrants' camp?"

"I did."

"Bravo! What did the Spy tell you?"

"Said—tell you there were two purty girls in the camp."

A peal of laughter burst from the outlaw's lips.

"Go on, Snake. What else?" said Rubal Ryan.

"Said there was lots of money in the camp."

Hadn't found out where it was kept, though thought it was in a two-wheeled wagon with a box on it. Said you'd have to wait till to-morrow night, as the death of Cule and Joht has delayed work to-night. Keen-Knife gone now."

"Well, that's a good riddance," heartily ejaculated Ryan.

"He may be back in time to thwart our plans," rejoined La Mort; "but have you any more news, Snake?"

"Yes," returned the evil-eyed messenger; "when I left the camp of the emigrants I saw the cloaked form of a man moving away before me. My fingers itched for his scalp, for I knew he was one of the emigrants; but I followed and watched him. He came directly to the cabins of Don La Mort. Under the Forked Cottonwood tree he stopped. Then I saw him take something from under his cloak, and lay it in the crotch of the tree. Then he went away. I didn't follow him, but went to the tree and found this," and Snake drew from the bosom of his calico shirt a small bouquet of wild flowers, around the stems of which were twined some broad spears of grass.

"By Heavens!" exclaimed La Mort, as he took the flowers, "this may give us some information—who knows?"

"But I can't see what information a bunch of posies would give you," said Captain Rubal.

"Then you don't understand the language of flowers," said La Mort, fumbling the bouquet over. "Well, it is a little strange that one of the emigrants should put this in the tree, now isn't it?"

"It surely is, Don Manuel; but I shouldn't wonder if it was put there for Camilla by some sneaking lover."

"Ah! see her!" exclaimed La Mort, removing the grass from about the stems, under which he found a neat, folded paper; "this will probably explain the whole mystery."

He unfolded the slip of white paper and saw it was written upon in a plain, bold hand, and read thus:

"MY DEAR CAMILLA:—After long, weary months of anxiety and suspense, I have again returned to the Raccoon with a colony which I was instrumental in getting up. My sole object, as well as their interest, was your release from the power of La Mort. And, as I tell you last May, I believe I have found your father—Major Thomas Bronson, who is with our party. I will place this note in our old post-office—the Forked Cottonwood, and I hope you will find it to-morrow. If you do, dear Camilla, make haste to answer it. To-morrow night at twelve o'clock, I will be under the tree, and would like an interview with you there. If you can meet me, come prepared to go with me to our camp. Once there we can defy the minions of Don La Mort, for we are prepared for any emergency.

FRANK HEYWARD."

An oath burst from the lips of La Mort, and he brought his clinched fist down upon the table with such force as shook the floor of the building.

"What now, impetuous Don Manuel La Mort?" exclaimed Rubal Ryan; "don't I implore you, don't jump out of your boots, nor go off on a tangent. Take a whiff of 'enthusiasm' to settle your nerves, and then explain the cause of your lordship's wrath."

"Read that, read that!" hissed La Mort, thrusting the paper under Captain Rubal's nose.

"Steady, La Mort, steady!" said Ryan, placidly, and taking the paper, read it.

"So, so!" exclaimed the outlaw when he had finished the letter. "Then my affianced Camilla has another lover. Frank Heyward—who is Frank Heyward, my dear, tumultuous Don Manuel?"

"You tell!" fumed the lord of the Lone Estate; "one of the cursed emigrants of course. And he has been in this neighborhood before—last May—and met Camilla and fell in love with her! Now he has returned to release her from the minions of Don La Mort! By Heaven, that's cool!"

Rubal Ryan burst into a roar of laughter, and thumbed his nose in a significant manner.

Knitting his brows with rage and fury, La Mort continued:

"It seems that the girl and her lover have mistrusted something of her parentage. Major Thomas Bronson! Well, well, we'll see about this matter. Frank Heyward shall be entrapped to-morrow night at twelve o'clock, and his life shall pay for his meddling. Here, Snake; take this bouquet and put it right where you got it. I'll watch Miss Camilla to-morrow; and to-morrow night—well, I've said what I'll do—entrap Mr. Heyward, and Camilla, too."

He carefully rearranged the paper and blades of grass, and then Snake carried the purloined missive back and deposited it in the forks of the cottonwood where he had found it.

Alas, poor Camilla! she little dreamt what a snare was being set for her young feet, and the lover for whom for long weary months she had been fretting her young life away.

CHAPTER XI.

WORK BEGINS.

THE morning dawned clear and pleasant, and as the sun rose above the distant range of hills, it shone upon a scene of life and bustle in the camp of the emigrants. Refreshed by a peaceful night's rest and quiet slumber, all felt fresh and vigorous, and filled with a new spirit of joy.

To his surprise, Major Tom found Frank Heyward in his tent at daylight, and for a moment he felt like demanding an explanation of his absence during the night. But he had had time to study over the letter found in the bottle, and so he concluded to keep the whole discovery a secret with Dora and Mildred, and maintain a watch upon Frank's movements. If he really was guilty of being in league with the enemy, it would be the way to convince himself of the fact—by catching him in some act that would point directly to his guilt. However, he hoped he would make no such discovery, and tried hard to convince himself that Frank's fidelity was above reproach.

Mildred and Dora seemed more light-hearted and charming than ever, and during the morning they strolled leisurely about the Peninsula in quest of pleasure and exercise, and to pour out the exuberance of their young spirits in song and admiration of the beauties of nature around them.

Most of the wagons were now unloaded and their canvas tilts removed, so they could be used in drawing building logs from the timber. The two-wheeled vehicle, with its long, narrow box, remained as usual, and more than once Mildred fixed her eyes upon it with an inquiring gaze.

After their morning meal was over, several teams were harnessed, and with ax and rifle, the men repaired to the woods for logs, crossing the creek some distance above the camp.

Guards were deployed in all directions to protect the choppers, and soon the ring of the white man's ax was heard in the virgin forest.

Anxiously was the return of Keen-Knife looked for. Surrounded by the dangers of hostile Indians, the colonists felt greatly the need of one of his experience as a scout to watch the movements of the cunning foe.

As the day wore on it found Dora and Mildred seated on the river-bank, at the lower side of the Peninsula, in conversation.

"Who do you think, Dora, Major Bronson suspected of sending that dispatch afloat on the river last night?"

"I have not the least idea, Mildred. None but Frank Heyward could be in league with the Indians and outlaws, for none but he and father have ever been in the country before they came in with the colony."

"Then Frank has been here?"

"Yes. Just last spring he and a number of young men came West on a hunting excursion. But Frank soon returned, and at once proposed to father to form a colony and go West. From that I always thought he had more than a common interest in this country, so you see he is the only one upon whom father could possibly place suspicion of being in league with the Indians or outlaws. But, Mildred"—and there was an earnest light in Dora's sparkling eyes—"I would as soon believe you guilty of the crime, as Frank Heyward."

A clear, metallic laugh rung from Mildred's lips.

"You little chit," she said to Dora; "I see you love Frank Heyward."

Dora colored and poutingly replied:

"No, I do not, Mildred; but he is worthy of any woman's love, and— But look yonder! Isn't that Keen-Knife, now? It surely is!"

Mildred looked in the direction indicated and saw a plumed head, with a flashing red cap upon it, appear above a little clump of bushes on the opposite side of the river.

"Yes, it is Keen-Knife," said Mildred, and her face grew white, as if with affright at sight of him.

"It is," replied Dora. "I recognize his red cap and white feathers, though I was sure I saw another dark face peering through the bushes to the right of him."

"Tut! tut, Dora! it is only imagination. Surely Keen-Knife would not be that close to a hostile Indian and not know it. See, he is motioning for one of us to bring the canoe over after him."

"The men are all in the woods and I'll go and bring him over to camp," said Dora, and rising to her feet, she tripped lightly along the bank to where the little canoe lay moored.

CHAPTER XII.

HIDING A TRAIL.

ON sped the fugitives, Keen-Knife and Bold-Heart, with the bounds of Death-Trail bellowing close behind.

"The lop-eared brutes will git us yit, Prince," said Rob Radeliff, glancing back at the forms gliding on with nose close upon the ground.

"If Keen-Knife and Bold-Heart had each a tomabawk, then they could defend themselves against the fangs of the brutes," replied the Indian.

"Yes, yes; here I am without a weapon of any kind, and you've nothin' but your rifle and knife."

"Take the rifle, Bold-Heart, and I will try and stop the bounds for a moment, at least."

Bold-Heart took the Indian's rifle; then the Friendly removed his crimson head-gear and threw it upon the ground as he ran on.

The act served his purpose, for the bounds stopped by the fillet and sniffed around it with a loud whining that told they had been thrown from the trail. But the sagacious old beagle soon struck the track again, and giving tongue, was off like a dart.

Keen-Knife now removed his mantle and dropped it, and again the bounds were detained, but it was only for a moment. He now took his rifle from Bold-Heart and changing his course so as to bring the bounds in fair view, he stopped short, and, turning, brought his rifle quickly to his face. It cracked, and the beagle—the foremost hound—fell dead.

This stopped the other bounds entirely, and not until Death-Trail came up and called them from the body of their leader, did they take the track again.

But the fugitives had now gained much advantage, and turning to the left, they entered a stony defile, which, as they continued to follow it, grew narrower at each step. And at last the high walls came so close that the fugitives were compelled to press their forms through sideways for several feet, when they found themselves in a little open valley, or plateau.

"Stop here," said Keen-Knife.

"What for, Prince? The bounds are close upon us."

"Let us slay them here. They can come through the defile only one behind the other, and we can kill them as fast as they come."

"True, true, Prince. An Indian for wit, every time. It will be a good riddance to slay them bounds, for—"

The rest of the sentence was drowned in the crack of the Friendly's rifle, and a howl of pain that told another of the bounds had been slain.

Laying aside his weapon, the Indian grasped a boulder in his right hand and awaited the approach of the dogs, which had already entered the defile.

Bold-Heart followed his friend's example and grasped a rock from the ground at his feet.

In two minutes more the last of Death-Trail's bloodhounds lay crushed and mangled in the defile.

Then with his defiant war-cry the fearless Keen-Knife dashed across the plateau and plunged into the woods beyond, closely followed by Bold-Heart.

A savage yell, mingled with oaths and curses, told the fugitives when the pursuers had reached the spot where the defile was blocked by the bodies of the dead hounds.

A grim smile of triumph swept over the face of Keen-Knife, and in a low guttural tone he said:

"No need run now. The savages will have to follow us by sight of our trail, and not by the sound of the hounds' voice. We can make tracks faster than they can count them."

"Then you think they will follow us, do you?"

"Yes. They will never leave our trail until they know we are safe beyond their reach. But we can throw them off the scent, Bold-Heart. Come."

Not far away a little creek went purling southward through the forest, and toward it Keen-Knife led the way. When he reached the bank, he turned and moved down its course, keeping to the water's edge, and bidding Bold-Heart to follow behind, but not to step in his tracks. Consequently both left a plain trail behind them in the sand.

They had continued thus over two hundred yards when they sheered gradually to the left until they found themselves wading in the center of the creek.

They now paused, and at a signal from the Indian both began walking backward from the water and along the shore, taking great care to plant their feet in the same tracks they had made in going down. When they had thus retraced about a hundred yards, they stepped aside into the water again, without leaving the least sign, whatever, of their having done so.

They now waded across the stream and concealed themselves under some dense foliage that hung to the water's brink.

Scarcely ten minutes elapsed before a number of Indians came gliding from the woods upon their trail, and not a little surprised were our friends when they saw that one of them wore the discarded head-dress and mantle of Keen-Knife.

A low cry of triumph escaped their savage lips when they discovered the track of the fugitives in the yielding sand, and with the swiftness of hounds they glided away upon it. They soon came, however, to where the trail entered the water, and here they seemed to hesitate.

Keen-Knife was afraid they might possibly detect his ruse. For several moments they examined the spot carefully, but despite their keenness of instinct and perception, they did not discover the cunning retrograde of the fugitives; but, supposing they had taken to the water and continued on down the creek, they pressed on in swift pursuit.

A low, silent laugh escaped Keen-Knife's lips, while Bold-Heart expressed his admiration of the Friendly's cunning in eluding the crafty foe.

They remained in their covert over an hour, and as the enemy did not return, they felt assured they had gone on, and were about to issue from their place of concealment, when the more cautious Keen-Knife laid his hand quickly on Bold-Heart's arm and drew him back into

the shadows, at the same time pointing through a little opening at a form that emerged from the woods on the opposite side of the creek.

It was the form of Death Trail, and his rough, brutal face wore an expression of rage and fury. In one hand he carried a rifle, in the other a tomahawk. The latter Keen-Knife quickly recognized as his own—the one with which he had brained Tim Bodsford. The rifle was Bold-Heart's.

Stopping within earshot of our friends, the outlaw burst out in a tempest of rage.

"Every hound dead!" he exclaimed, aloud. "Curse them boy imps! This tomahawk"—and he raised the weapon as if to strike an imaginary foe—"shall be buried in the brain of that Indian, as he buried it in Tim Bodsford's—not that I care so much for Tim, but them hounds. And this rifle, I hope, will send a bullet through its owner's heart, for if it hadn't been for him, my hounds wouldn't have been smashed into a jelly this minit. There was old Sult, the leader, and a better hound never sunk tooth in the flesh o' a captive. And Sult's dead, poor dog—yes, every devil o' 'em's dead! Cuss them boy imps!"

At this juncture Bold-Heart saw his companion stoop and pick up a small stone; then stepping quickly from his covert, hurled it with all his power at the outlaw.

The villain caught sight of the youth just as he drew back to throw, and in order to avert the blow, he stooped slightly forward. Keen-Knife, however, had anticipated this very movement on the part of the foe, and aimed at the breast. The missile struck the outlaw square on the top of the head, crashing in the skull, and felling him dead without a moan.

"By blazes, Prince! you throw as you shoot—dead to the center!" said Bold-Heart.

"Ugh!" was the response of the Friendly, as they crept from their covert and advanced to the fallen outlaw. "Stone is good as bullet if you know how to use 'em."

The outlaw was indeed stone dead, and Bold-Heart lost no time in possessing himself of his rifle and accouterments, and Keen-Knife secured his tomahawk. Nor did the victory of the Indian end here; before Bold-Heart could stay him from the bloody act, the scalp of the white ruffian hung at his girdle.

The next moment they were moving away through the woods.

They traveled on in silence for hours, seldom speaking, and keeping a wary watch around them. Their footsteps were echoless, and they seemed like phantoms gliding amid the shadows of the wood.

Keen-Knife was in advance, and Bold-Heart, younger and less experienced in woodcraft, had only to imitate, as near as possible, his movements in order to proceed with equal silence.

Suddenly the young Prince stopped, and with a low, guttural "ugh," threw himself down flat upon the earth, as if he had been shot.

Bold-Heart followed his example, and it was then that he heard a low sob, followed by the crashing of some heavy bodies through the undergrowth not far away.

CHAPTER XIII.

DORA IN TROUBLE.

It required but a few minutes for Dora to reach the canoe and enter it. Then she plied the oars vigorously, and the next moment was dropping down toward the opposite shore.

Mildred watched her with an expression denoting uneasiness and uncertainty.

The Indian still maintained his position behind the clump of bushes. Only his head and shoulders were visible to Dora, while he was screened entirely from those at camp by an intermediate knot of bushes.

"Oh, Keen-Knife!" exclaimed Dora, when the prow of her craft had touched upon the beach, "how anxiously have we waited your return!"

The Indian made no reply, but advanced quickly toward her, and it was then that Dora saw it was not Keen-Knife, but a Sioux warrior wearing the Friendly's red head-dress and blue mantle.

With great presence of mind Dora essayed to push the craft back into the river, but the savage saw her intention, and quick as the movement of a panther, he sprung forward and seized the boat by the prow, and drew it half-up on the beach. Then another dusky form glided from the shrubbery, and throwing a blanket over her head and shoulders, lifted her lightly in his arms and bore her rapidly back into the woods.

For fully three minutes Mildred sat like one in a trance, then springing to her feet as if from a fearful dream, she ran back to camp with the startling news of Dora Barnwell's fate.

The information almost produced a panic among the women and children, but one woman retained her composure sufficiently to seize a dinner-horn and blow a few sharp blasts upon it. This was the signal—agreed upon—to the men in the woods, that danger menaced the camp and that their presence was needed.

Dora Barnwell struggled desperately for freedom and tried to cry out, but the thick folds of the blanket completely stifled her voice. She was conscious of being borne swiftly away—of hearing the patter of feet, then all became blank to her.

There were four of her captors, a part of the band we left on the supposed trail of Keen-Knife and Bold-Heart, and one of whom, it will be remembered, had donned the Friendly's discarded head-dress and mantle, by which the capture of the maiden had been cunningly achieved.

The subtle foe knew that only great haste would enable them to retain their captive against pursuers, and changing the inanimate form from one to the other, they were enabled to move with great rapidity.

Not until they were far away did they attempt to hide their trail. Coming to a point where a small creek debouched from a dark valley they stopped. One of them quickly pointed out what seemed to be the dry bed of a stream, lying parallel with, and not a great way from the living stream.

Close examination showed the wily red-men that the little stream had been turned from its original course for some purpose or other; how-

ever, it was just what suited their purpose, and they proceeded at once to avail themselves of its proffered advantage.

Two of the savages took the captive, and stepping into the dry bed proceeded down its course for some distance. Then they turned aside and moved away into the forest, while the other two Indians proceeded to turn the stream into the dry bed, thereby obliterating the trail of their comrades. This done, they turned and moved away in a direction altogether different from that taken by the two with the captive, leaving a broad trail behind them to mislead any one disposed to follow them into the belief that they had the captive.

Believing they had effectually concealed their trail, the two captors moved on more leisurely, for the unconscious form of the maiden was no light burden. Only their dogged patience and savage triumph kept them from braining and scalping their helpless captive.

They moved on, and soon entered a dense thicket through which they pressed with great difficulty, and emerged into a densely-wooded spot clear of undergrowth.

Just then two dark forms arose before them from the ground—there was a vivid flash—the sharp report of a rifle—a death-wail, and one of the savages fell dead—shot through the brain. The other dropped the inanimate form of Dora and fled, but the sound of pursuing footsteps rung upon his ear.

When Dora awoke to consciousness, the murmur of rippling water was the first sound that broke upon her ears. Then, through the tree-tops overhead she saw the light of day, and a shadowy form hovering over her. She felt the gentle touch of a hard, cool hand, that thrilled her with a new life and strength. And then she soon became conscious of a fair, boyish face, beaming with anxiety and admiration, bending over her. Who was it? She tried to recall her situation and a remembrance of the face hovering over her so tenderly, but without avail.

Then a footstep sounded near. The boyish face turned aside and a voice asked softly:

"Did ye git the lopin' varlet, Prince? Ah, yes! I see you did. Throw the bloody thing away—she's returnin' to life, and 'll sicken at sight of it. But, I tell ye, Prince, she's an angel!"

Keen-Knife removed the scalp from his girdle and tossed it aside, then advancing nearer, said:

"Yes, she is very beautiful, Bold-Heart, and brave, too; but I fear they have had trouble at the camp."

At sound of his low, musical voice, Dora's bewildered senses came back, and soon she was enabled to sit up. Then she recalled the past, and acquainted her rescuers with the manner of her capture.

Keen Knife angrily shook the folds of his recovered mantle, as if to expel an evil spirit from it.

"Let us hurry to the camp. We may be needed there," he said.

"Yes; the woods may be full of the skulkin' knaves," added Bold-Heart.

"Can you walk, fair girl?" questioned the young Prince,

"Yes; I feel strong as ever now," she replied.

Then she arose to her feet, and supported by the arm of Bold-Heart, they set off on their return to the camp, Keen-Knife leading the way.

CHAPTER XIV.

BOLD-HEART AND THE MAJOR IN CONSULTATION.

WHEN the young hunters, Keen-Knife and Bold-Heart reached the Peninsula with Dora, they found the emigrants in a state of great excitement. A party had been formed and was just on the eve of starting in pursuit of Dora's captors, when they arrived.

The young men were received with great rejoicing, and words of kindness and heartfelt thanks were poured upon their heads by Major Tom for the restoration of his little ward. And none seemed more joyous over her rescue than did Mildred Cleveland.

The major now took Bold-Heart into his tent, and proceeded to question him in regard to the maiden at the Lone Estate.

"No longer than yesterday I met the gal at the Lone Estate," said the youth, in reply to a question of the major's.

"Did she tell you her name?"

"She said it war Camilla La Mort."

"Do you think that she resembles La Mort—that she is his own daughter?"

"She don't resemble him, major, more than one of your niggers resembles the moon. And I'm satisfied that she's not his child, though she called him father. Thar's other white women 'bout that ranch, but I never see'd one of 'em spare in the face. La Mort and me had a little difficulty yesterday 'bout the gal. I met her ridin' out and had a little talk with her. She said her father was a villain, and promised, if I'd never tell whar I got the news, and would carry a message to some one far away—a lover, I suppose—she'd tell me all about the old man's business. I promised I'd do as she requested, and so she war about to tell me, when who should step out of the thicket near by but Don La Mort! He had heard all we said, and undertook to tan my jacket, but I grabbed his whip and gave him the blind staggers quick as a wink. I know he's a villain, major, and in league with the Indians and Rubal Ryan's prairie-pirates. I've been a-threatening to report him to the authorities, but I hate to on account of that innocent little gal, Camilla. But, major, La Mort has crossed my path, and boy though I be, he'll have to pollygise, or leave the country, and that soon."

"Do not be in a hurry, Bold-Heart," said Major Tom, "for I have every reason to believe Camilla La Mort is my daughter."

"Your darter? The dickens! how's that, major?" asked Rob, in his free, familiar manner.

"Years ago," said the major, with a sigh, "I had a child stolen, and years of search proved fruitless. About the time she was missed, a villainous Spaniard—and a bitter enemy of mine—left the neighborhood and was never heard of more. And now, although it is not the name, I have been led to think La Mort is Gaspard La Muerte, himself; and she who gives her name as Camilla, my child."

"It may all be, major," returned Bold-Heart, "for I know an angel can't be the offspring of a demon, and Camilla is the one and La Mort the other."

"Does Camilla resemble that, Bold-Heart?" asked Bronson, taking from his breast-pocket a likeness of a child some six or seven years old and handing it to the youth.

"By the blue blazes, major!" he exclaimed, the instant his eyes fell upon the fair young face, "that's Camilla's eyes and features to a gnat's beel, though she's got long hair now, and looks older and more womanly than the picter."

"That is very probable, Bold-Heart, for it has been ten years since this picture was taken."

"It may be your gal then, major."

"It must be!" repeated the old man, as though loth to believe otherwise; "but, Bold-Heart, how long can you remain with us?"

"If thar's need for me, I can stay as long as wanted."

"I do want you, Bold-Heart, at least until I have seen and talked with Camilla La Mort. I will doubly satisfy you for your loss in being absent from your traps and hunting."

"Never mind the pay, major," replied the youth, as his mind reverted to pretty Dora Barnwell; "I shall be glad to serve you for the sake of—of bein' in your camp."

"Then I have one request to make to you."

"Name it."

"That you keep a close watch upon the movements of every person in this camp. Keen-Knife told me last night, there was a traitor in camp, and confirmed the fact by producing an intercepted dispatch that was being sent in an air-tight bottle on the river to some one outside of camp. He did not say who the traitor was—it may be he did not know. But I want you to try and find out. Say nothing of your intentions to any one—not even Keen-Knife."

"Your request shall be granted, major," said Bold-Heart.

"Then I shall resign to you the defense of our camp, for our experience in Indian cunning is limited, and we have felt greatly the need of an efficient scout and guide."

Bold-Heart felt greatly elated by the confidence bestowed upon his experience, and the responsibility imposed on his young shoulders; nevertheless, he accepted them with thanks and manifest pleasure, and at once repaired to his duty.

He wandered about camp, carefully noting the advantages and disadvantages of its location, the horses, cattle and wagons with an eye of critical admiration. But when he came to the two-wheeled vehicle with its broad tires and long, narrow box tightly closed, he found something that puzzled him. He could not, for the life of him, make out what it contained, and why it was kept guarded so closely; and like Mildred, he did not like to inquire into its contents for fear of being considered inquisitive.

While Bold-Heart was thus occupied, Keen-Knife and Frank Heyward were ensconced in the latter's tent, deeply engaged in conversation.

"Keen-Knife, I want your service to-night in a little matter which I want to keep secret from

the rest of the emigrants until it is over with," said Frank.

"What is it?" asked the Prince, as his mind reverted to the person he had seen abroad the night before in the vicinity of the Lone Estate.

"There is a maiden," Frank replied, "at the Lone Estate whom I am going there to meet. Last night I was near the place and left a letter for her in a tree. If she gets it, she will either leave an answer or be there herself. If she is there, she will come with me to camp, for she wishes to escape from La Mort."

This explanation removed all suspicion from the Indian's mind of what he had seen the night before, and he at once replied:

"Then you know the maiden of the dark-browed man?"

"Yes, Prince; six months ago I met her in the woods near the Lone Estate. I was in the country then with three others on a hunting excursion; and I would have gone to the maiden's home, but she begged me not to on account of her father, who was a bad man. I met her several times after that, and then when she was forbidden to take her daily ride through the forest, we carried on a correspondence by letter, using a forked tree near the place as a post-office. By this means I learned that she was unhappy, and in doubt as to whether Don La Mort was her father. From some facts that I gleaned, and others which I already possessed, I had some reason to believe she was the daughter of Major Tom Bronson, an old friend of mine. He had a child stolen years ago, and from the description I gave him of her, he believes Camilla is his daughter. But, now that he is so near her, he is in painful doubt as to whether he would recognize her. She was but a little child when stolen. So I wish to go to the Lone Estate to-night, unknown to any one but you and I, and if possible, bring Camilla to our camp, and present her to the major without telling him who she is, and see if he will recognize her as his lost daughter, after so many long years of cruel separation."

"The heart of the young man beats with kindness," said Keen-Knife, "and I will assist him to do the good work he proposes."

"Then, an hour before midnight call at my tent."

"Let my white friend be ready. Keen-Knife will be there."

CHAPTER XV.

AT THE HOUR OF MIDNIGHT.

ALTHOUGH Camilla La Mort had been absolutely refused the privilege of leaving her room, unless accompanied by the mistress of Don La Mort, a dark-eyed woman of fiery temperament and passionate nature, she was not a little and happily surprised when her father rescinded that order of limitation on the morning following the arrival of Captain Rubal and his men at the Lone Estate. He gave her permission to take her accustomed walk in quest of such pleasure as her nature longed for, but under no circumstances was she to go beyond the limits of the estate.

Camilla thought strange of her father thus revoking his previous order, and wondered to what influence was owing the change of heart. She little dreamed, poor girl, the meaning that

lay hidden like an adder behind the act of apparent kindness.

Anxious to get beyond the dark, prison-like walls of her room, Camilla donned a light shawl and wandered forth at an early hour to enjoy the cool morning air within the shadow of the little wood that skirted the river. She seemed grave and thoughtful, yet from the fixed expression of the eye, it was plainly evident that her thoughts were not upon any thing around her, but something far away that gave her both joy and pain, as an occasional smile or sigh bore evidence.

But she little dreamed that every movement she made—every expression of the face and glance of the eye, were being closely watched and noted by her father's half-breed scout.

As she had been accustomed to do for the past two months, Camilla made the Forked Cottonwood a resting point in her morning walks. She did this more through a longing desire to find there a communication from the lover to whom she had betrothed herself months before, and who was entirely unknown to La Mort. The lover had promised to return and carry her away from her prison home, and he had requested her to watch their secret post-office closely, for he did not know how soon he might return with a force of sufficient strength to release her, in spite of the minions of Don La Mort.

So, upon the morning in question, when she went to the old trysting-place and there found a delicate little bouquet of flowers, her heart fluttered wildly and tears of silent joy filled her eyes.

She kissed the flowers and pressed them to her heart. There was no mistaking who they were from. Intuition told her this. Frank had come back, and now her life of misery would be over, and her marriage with the outlaw, Rubal Ryan, averted. This was a joyous realization.

She knew where to look for the letter, and when she had secured it, and read it, she knew not whether to cry or laugh, her emotions of joy and happiness were so great. She read and reread the delicate missive until committed to memory, then for fear it might fall into the wrong hands, she tore it into pieces and threw them into the river.

The Snake saw all these movements and emotions of joy, and when she went back to her room, he went directly to Don La Mort with the news of his observation.

La Mort and Ryan chuckled together over their devilish cunning. And during the day they remained in close consultation, plotting, not only for the capture of Camilla's lover, but the destruction of the emigrant camp for the sake of the plunder and gold, which their spy had informed them, was no little sum.

The Snake was still set to watch Camilla, upon whose freedom, and access to and from whose room there was not the least restriction.

The day wore away and at dark Snake reported that Camilla had put no letter in the tree. From this La Mort knew she intended to reply to her lover in person, and no doubt flee with him.

In fact, this was just what Camilla had decided upon doing, and to allay all, or the least suspicion, she retired as usual, to her bed-chamber shortly after dark. But she did not go for sleep and rest, as usual.

There was no light in her room, nor was there one to be seen in all the house.

As hour after hour wore on and the time for her meeting with her lover drew near, Camilla grew restless, and a feverish impatience, mingled with fear and hope took possession of her.

All was still in the house. The repulsive voice and ribald laugh of Rubal Ryan and his men could not be heard, as on the previous night, in drunken revel with the master of the place, Don La Mort.

Camilla knew by the stars which she had studied in her lonely hours, that it was near midnight, and having first implored the Divine protection and guidance of the steps she was about taking for better or worse, she arose from her humble position and threw a dark cloak hood-like over her head and shoulders.

Softly she opened the door and passed on tip-toe out into the narrow hall, along which she stole to the rear entrance.

Here she paused and listened. All was still. She opened the door and passed out into the garden, then by a circuitous route reached the Forked Cottonwood.

She could scarcely restrain a cry of disappointment when she found her lover was not there. Still she thought it might not be midnight, and so quieted her emotions with the belief that he would yet come.

She seated herself and listened—listened so intently that her own heart seemed to create a tumult in its throbbings. Once she was sure she heard the rustle of a leaf—then the low, suppressed breathing of powerful lungs; but all this she accorded to the feverish excitement of her mind, as fancy.

Suddenly a light footstep fell upon her ear, then she saw the figure of a man approaching her through the gloom.

Love's memory instantly recalled the familiarity of that footstep and that manly form, and with heart throbbing joyously, wildly, she arose to her feet and advanced to meet her lover.

"Camilla!"

"Frank!"

CHAPTER XVI.

CLOSETED WITH THE DEAD.

In due time Keen-Knife called at Frank Heyward's tent. He found Frank armed and cloaked for his midnight journey to the Lone Estate; and without delay, they took their departure from the camp, carefully eluding the guards and Bold-Heart, whom Keen-Knife knew was scouting about the Peninsula.

The Friendly led the way through the dark forest, and at such a rapid speed that Frank could hardly keep pace with him. However, it was not long until they found themselves in the immediate vicinity of La Mort's cabin.

Frank's emotions now became aroused. Anxiety, hope and love were crossed with fear and uncertainty.

When they had gained a point not far from the cabin of La Mort, he and his red companion came to a halt in order to interrogate the surroundings. All was quiet about the place—not a sign of life could be

seen nor heard, not even the flash of fire-fly, nor the chirp of a cricket. All and every thing about the premises seemed wrapped in profound slumber.

"If you will remain here, Prince," Frank finally said, "I will move on to the Forked Cottonwood and see if Camilla has left a note, or is there in person. In either case I will rejoin you in a few minutes, unless I should get into trouble, then a sharp whistle will be my call."

"Keen-Knife will remain here," said the Prince, seating himself upon a huge log, "and will come to your assistance if needed. Go bring the fair maiden that the heart of my friend loves so well."

Frank turned and moved away toward the cottonwood, which was about two hundred yards distant.

Keen-Knife now relapsed into silence, putting every faculty on the alert. Accustomed as he had been from infancy to the signs of the wilderness after nightfall, there was no deceiving his sense of hearing. If there were nothing at all to be heard of animate nature, it was a certain, infallible sign that danger was abroad in some form or other; and this he believed to be the case at the present moment.

He was concealed in a narrow strip of woods skirting the river, and with the true Indian precaution and sagacity, he made as careful a survey of his situation as the darkness would permit.

The log upon which he had seated himself was a linden of immense size. The white ends showed that it had been quite recently chopped down. It had, also, been cut in two, the portion upon which Keen-Knife sat being about thirty feet long, and entirely free of limbs or knots. The Friendly supposed it had been cut—by La Mort's negroes no doubt—for the purpose of making a canoe, by the natives called a *dugout*. But in further gratifying his Indian curiosity, he discovered that the log was hollow at one end—in fact, was a mere shell. It being thus rendered unfit for a dugout, he could form no idea for what it was intended.

He, also, noticed that from the log the bank sloped gradually down to the river's brink, and he was careful about it when he realized what a little power it would take to send the prostrate monarch rolling down the slope into the river.

Something like ten minutes had passed after Frank had left him, when Keen-Knife suddenly caught the light tread of feet mingled with the sound of many voices.

He became alarmed, not for his own safety but that of his friend. He knew by the sound it was not Frank returning with the maiden. He—Frank—would not have been so thoughtless of the surrounding dangers, as to have been so loud in speech and careless in movements. No, the tread was heavy, like that of booted feet moving under a weight, and the voices were coarse and husky.

The Indian quickly threw himself upon the ground to make a more careful examination of his situation. He now saw fully a half-dozen forms coming directly toward him from the direction of La Mort's ranch. From their movements and talk he knew they were white men—a party of outlaws without a doubt.

To elude discovery, Keen-Knife slipped himself quickly backward into the hollow log some ten feet from the opening. Here he lay in breathless silence and listened to the approaching footsteps.

The party came on and he was not a little surprised when he found they had stopped near the log. Here they engaged in a brief consultation inaudible to the Prince, but which was followed by a slight commotion; then the Friendly saw the mouth of the log closed up, and at the same time he became painfully conscious of the fact that something or some one was either crawling into the hollow, or was being forced into it.

The log was over three feet in diameter, and there was ample room within it for the Indian to sit erect; and no sooner did he hear and feel the movements of the creature—whatever it was—entering his re-

treat, than he raised himself to a sitting posture and drew his knife for defense.

But, to his peace of mind, the sound soon ceased, and then he saw a faint glimmer of light again at the entrance.

He listened, and heard a strange voice say:

"That'll do, boys. I presume no one will ever find it in there."

"Who cares if any one does, captain?" asked a second voice.

"Not me for one. Now block the entrance, boys, and let's heave her in," said the first speaker.

Keen-Knife started. He knew the persons were villains—no doubt La Mort and his accomplices. But what had they deposited in the log? He bent low and tried to ascertain, but the darkness was too intense. And what did they mean by blocking the entrance and heaving her in?

The one he felt almost certain meant the closing of the log, and he experienced no little uneasiness when he suspected what the other might possibly mean. In the first he soon found he was correct. He saw the entrance of the log suddenly closed up with a block of wood, making all blinding darkness within the place. This was followed by a heavy pounding at the entrance, and it was then that the Prince realized more fully that he had been entrapped, and that the block was being wedged fast in the end of the log. However, he did not permit his fears to betray his presence. Such an act would have been a mark of cowardice to him, and he would rather have perished in the log than to ask mercy at the hand of the outlaws. But he had little fear of perishing in the log, for with his knife he could soon chip his way out.

As soon as the pounding ceased, all became quiet, and the entrapped Prince heard the sound of retreating footsteps. But a moment later he heard them approaching again, and felt a vibratory shock upon the log, and heard a stentorian voice cry out:

"Now! all together! yea-he-o!"

Keen-Knife felt the log move, and the next instant he was barely conscious of whirling in rapid evolutions within the log. Losing all control of himself, he was dashed with almost stunning violence against the sides of his narrow prison. But this did not last long. The log soon ceased its rapid motion by rolling, with a thunderous splash, into the river, and for a moment was buried beneath the waves.

It was several moments before the Prince could get himself aright and collect his thoughts sufficiently to realize the magnitude of his danger.

His first fears were of the log filling with water, for already he could hear it creeping in through the crevices at the entrance. He could scarcely, however, keep his balance sufficiently to make any efforts at escape, for the log kept such a continuous rolling and dipping in the water as kept him prostrate. But at length it became quiet, and then our red friend was enabled to regain a sitting posture, and define more fully the perils of his situation—of being afloat on the river in a hollow log from which there was little hope of escape!

He soon found, however, there was one thing in his favor that he had not calculated upon. One end of the log was perfectly sound, and this inequality of weight, tending toward an equilibrium, threw the hollow end of the log above the surface of the water. This he discovered from not only the inclined position of the log, but the more agreeable fact that no water entered the log after it had become settled.

He could feel that he was floating at the will of the current, and by remaining perfectly quiet the log would neither dip nor roll in the water. But to remain quiet altogether was to remain inactive, and this the Prince could not do when he thought of his young friend Heyward and the dangers to which he would be exposed.

He felt confident the outlaws knew nothing of his presence in the log, but what had they put with-

in it?

He had scarcely asked himself the question when

his ears were greeted by a low gasp, that was followed by a slight movement at the end of the log. He was startled by the sounds, and listened for a repetition of them, but all was silent as the tomb, save the light swash of the waters over the outside.

The Prince, however, was not satisfied with this silence, and resolved to make some investigation in his prison-barge.

He turned and slowly put his hand out before him toward the mouth of the log, and he started with a low cry when it came in contact with something which, upon closer examination, he found to be a human body!

This was what the outlaws had put into the log, which they had rolled into the river to conceal the evidence of their crime.

A shudder of horror thrilled the form of the Indian when he realized that he was fastened up in the tomb, as it were, along with its silent, ghastly occupant!

CHAPTER XVII.

BOLD-HEART ON THE ALERT.

BOLD-HEART, true to his promise made to Major Tom, kept a close watch over the camp during the night; but despite his vigilance, Keen-Knife and Frank Heyward had made their way out of camp unobserved. However, they had been gone but a short time when he discovered their absence, and was on his way to report the fact to the major when he saw a cloaked figure, with muffled head, steal out from the group of tents in a crouching attitude. He tried to identify the form, but failed. Yet from the stealth of its movements, he knew it was being actuated by some forbidden motive, whoever it was; and so he followed it up, determined to see where it went to.

It crept to the two-wheeled vehicle and examined it closely over and over when moved on. On the banks of the river it stopped, and crouching down, turned its head up and down the stream as if looking for something or some one. In this attitude it remained for several minutes, then it started up and began moving down the river.

Bold-Heart glanced after the figure and saw some distance beyond it the quick flash of a blue light, which he believed was a preconcerted signal understood by the skulking form who was moving toward it.

By a circuitous route the Boy Hunter got in ahead of the figure in hopes of finding out who it was.

He threw himself in the tall prairie-grass under which he cunningly concealed his form from the most penetrating eye.

To his surprise the figure came on and stopped within arm's length of him. Here it was joined by a second person who stood dimly outlined against the starry sky and who he saw was an Indian.

The young hunter listened intently to catch the words that passed between them. They spoke in a low, hurried tone, glancing warily around them in the mean time.

"What news?" asked the Indian of the cloaked figure, in a tone just loud enough to reach Rob's ear.

"Their suspicion is aroused," replied the figure; "you'll have to be quick. The money, I'm sure, is in a large, rude box on a two-wheeled vehicle, probably in an iron safe. The tent of the two girls, Dora Barnwell and Mildred Cleveland, is near the center of the camp. Keen-Knife and the Boy Hunter both are about. What news from the ranch?"

"A letter was found in the Forked Cottonwood last night written to Camilla by a lover that signed his name Frank Heyward. But the letter was put back and Camilla permitted to receive it. They're goin' to run off to-night—that is they intended to—but the Don and Rubal Ryan are goin' to kapter him."

The cloaked figure started, and, in a tone that denoted excitement, said:

"What did they intend to do with him?"

"Don't know, Spy," returned the Indian.

"Tell Don Manuel, for the sake of her who loves Frank Heyward, to spare his life, for the dagger that takes his life will reach the heart of Faye La Mort!"

"I'll tell him, Spy," replied the Indian, "but to-morrow Inkpaducah and a hundred warriors will be in the vicinity, and to-morrow *night* the attack is to be made on the encampment, at the hour when the emigrants are all wrapped in slumber."

"But how will you know when that hour comes?"

"You are to give the signal. Here is a bottle filled with phosphorus, and at any moment *after* midnight, when you stand on the bank of the river and toss it into the air, it will be seen and the attack commence. But you'll have to be careful, Spy, if you elude the cunning foxes, Keen-Knife and Bold-Heart."

"From what direction is the attack to be made?"

"Before midnight the Indians will descend the river in canoes to within a short distance of the camp. Then they'll take their canoes from the water, drag 'em around through the woods and approach the opposite bank. The instant the signal is given, the party will rush from their ambushment—launch their canoes—cross the river and attack the place before the men can seize their arms. Now remember."

So saying the Indian scout turned and glided away, while the cloaked figure glided back to camp so rapidly that our friend was unable to follow him to see which tent he entered.

The youth admitted himself somewhat outwitted. He was fully satisfied that there was a traitor in camp, and had he been better acquainted with all its members, he probably would have identified the voice. However, he went forthwith to the major's tent and arousing him, made known all that had transpired under his observation during the night.

The major was greatly surprised and somewhat excited by the youth's story; but he felt thankful that Frank Heyward had been cleared of all suspicion of being a traitor. But who was *the* traitor?

Rob described the figure as being tall, and covered from head to foot with a long blanket or cloak. The voice was neither hoarse nor soft, but rising and falling in a quick, excited tone.

"Great God!" exclaimed the major in great agony of spirit, "who can that traitor be? Which of the friends that I have always considered a firm, tried friend is betraying our camp into the Indians' power? The money they can have, if they will only spare the lives of my friends and my two darlings, Dora and Mildred. No, no, Bold-Heart, they must not have my girls! I will die in their defense! But go, young man, and keep a close watch over our camp, and your reward shall be whatever you name. To-morrow night we will be prepared for Inkpaducah and his minions. And then we must slay the traitor that's bartering our lives away. Oh, it is awful to talk of taking the life of a friend! Surely it cannot be Ethan White, for he has a family that would be in danger. No, no, it cannot be any of the whites. It must be one of the blacks—probably Vasco—Frank Heyward's servant, a tall, powerful man, who has seen much of life as a Mississippi boatman and has made several overland trips from St. Louis to Santa Fe. Yes, it must be Vasco, although he has always seemed kind-hearted, honest and faithful. Go, Bold-Heart, and let your vigils be unceasing over our camp. Remember, over fifty lives are intrusted to your care."

Bold-Heart turned and left the tent, while Major Tom returned to his couch to brood over the increasing dangers, but not to sleep.

The night wore away and morning dawned. All were early astir, filled with new life and vigor. The major concealed his emotion as best he could, and went forth, hoping to read in the face of the traitor, whoever he was, the evil of his heart. But he was disappointed. The face of every one seemed as joy-

ous and innocent as the sweet, fair faces of his two pets, Dora and Mildred.

Vasco was there, full of life and honest mirth as ever; and it was he who first discovered the absence of his young master and Keen-Knife from the camp.

Much speculation was entertained over their mysterious absence, but in the midst of their wonderment a human cry suddenly pealed out on the morning air, and riveted every form with terror.

The cry was that of distress, and was faint at first, but as it continued to peal out again and again, it grew louder and louder with each succeeding yell.

"What is it?" was the question that passed from lip to lip.

But the only answer that came to their ears was another cry, that seemed to issue from beneath the silent bosom of the river.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE FUGITIVES.

"CAMILLA."

"Frank."

The hearts of the lovers, Frank Heyward and Camilla La Mort, were too full of joy for further utterance, and they clasped each other in one fond, lingering embrace. The silence that followed spoke plainer than words could have done of the love-communing of those young hearts.

It was several moments before either spoke, but finally Frank breathed into the ear of his darling a renewal of his love that found an echo in Camilla's heart.

They spoke briefly of their long separation, then Frank asked:

"Have you decided to go with me, Camilla, to the camp of the emigrants?"

"Would such a course be prudent, dear Frank?"

"I would not ask you to go, if it were not, sweet Camilla."

"Then I will go, Frank, for within a few days, I was to become the unwilling bride of Rubal Ryan, the outlaw captain."

"Thank Heaven!" cried Frank, "I am in time to prevent it! Come, Camilla, come."

"Oh, Frank! See those dark forms!"

Before another word could be uttered, a number of dark forms glided from the thicket surrounding the tree, and the next instant blankets were thrown over the lovers' heads, preventing them from crying out. Frank was then felled unconscious to the earth under a crashing blow of a club, while Camilla was lifted in a pair of strong arms and borne swiftly back toward the cabin.

She struggled desperately for freedom, but all in vain. She had been carried over a hundred yards when she heard the quick rush of feet, followed by a dull, crunching blow. Then she felt the arms of her captor relax their vise-like gripe from around her form, and she sunk to the earth.

Quickly she threw aside the heavy blanket that enveloped her form and sprung to her feet. Before her stood one of her father's negroes, a gray-headed man of sixty, with a club in his hand. At his feet lay the unconscious form of Rubal Ryan.

"Dico!" exclaimed Camilla, "is it you who have rescued me from that villain?"

"It jis' am dat, Miss Milla, and may de good Lor' bless your soul, chile," replied Dico, trembling with fear; "ole Dico smelt a mice and knowed dar war gwine wrong wid de master and de pirate cap'n. But, Miss Milla, ole Dico's back 'll have to bleed fur dis. I knows it all de time, chile, but I couldn't see young missus 'bused by the fernal bad men."

"Do you know what they have done with him—Frank Heyward, Dico?" asked Camilla.

"Don't know who he yar, chile; but de ole master and de cap'n's men are doin' debbiltry down dar."

"Oh, my God, Dico! I fear they are doing murder!"

"Oh, oh!" groaned Dico, "and s'pects dis nigger will have to die, too, fur strikin' de cap'n down."

"Dico, you can save your life and mine too. On the river below here there is a large party of emigrants camped. We can seek safety there. Let us flee."

"Oh, de good salvashun!" exclaimed Dico, clapping his withered palms with joy; "den come, Miss Milla, and let's hurry off."

Old Dico hurried away by a circuitous route so as to avoid the cabins, Camilla following close behind him.

Entering the cornfield at the rear of the house, they threaded their way across the inclosure and entered the forest a mile east of the cabins.

Poor Camilla! her situation and feelings were terrible, though the fearful uncertainty of her lover's fate was more torturing than the fear of being recaptured by her father.

The aged negro led the way onward through the woods without regard to the course he was pursuing, and Camilla was too greatly distracted to think of aught but her lover.

They wandered on and on, and at last the kind-hearted and ignorant old darky realized that he was lost. But he had thought enough to keep the fact from Camilla, whose spirits he saw were already failing.

At length they seated themselves on the trunk of a fallen tree to rest and listen. They were upon an elevated ridge, and far away through the woods they saw a number of lights bobbing about in the vicinity of the Lone Estate.

"They are searching for us, Dico," said Camilla, sadly.

"Spect so, Miss 'Milla. But many's de time dis ole slave hab heard de bay ob de bloodhound when hid in the swamps ob ole Lou'sanna. But dar's no hounds now. Miss 'Milla, and we needn't be much 'fraid, but it'll be death to ole Dico if ebber cotched again. He's gettin' ole and feeble and can't do much work, and so de master wouldn't lose much by my death."

"But, Dico, it will be worse than death for me if I am taken by my father again," said Camilla.

"Lor', Miss 'Milla, if ye knows jis' what dis ole nigger does, you'd nebber call de ole massa La Mort father again."

Camilla started, and laying her hand upon the darky's, asked, excitedly:

"Why, Dico, is not Manuel La Mort my father?"

"Lor', 'Milla!" returned the darky, "I'se 'feared these trees hab ears and 'll bear witness 'g'inst ole Dico, den he'll hab to die if taken by de ole master."

"You need have no fear, Dico. There is nothing about us that has ears to hear. Speak, good Dico, and tell me what you know of my parentage."

"De ole master promised to kill me if I ever told it, Miss 'Milla, but den I had nebber live happy wid de secret on my ole heart. No, no, Miss 'Milla, you'se not de chile ob Don La Mort, but de chile ob a gentleman who lived wid his invalid wife at San Augustine, in Floridy, long time ago."

"How do you know this, Dico?"

"God bress ye, chile, it war ole Dico dat carry ye one whole long night in his arms when de ole master stole ye from de bower in de grove 'mong de magnollas and orange trees."

"Oh, Dico!" moaned Camilla, "why haven't you told me this before?"

"'Ca'se de ole master promised to flog me to death if ebber I told it, and, Miss 'Milla, life am sweet even to an ole nigger who had toiled under de lash fifty long years."

"Yes, yes, Dico, life is sweet to all. I know the power that has kept you silent. Manuel La Mort would have kept his word. But do you know, Dico, what my father's name is?"

"No, Miss 'Milla; you was a little chile when stolen, and cried heap for papa and mamma, so pitiful dat dis nigger's heart was almost broke."

Camilla was silent for several minutes, trying to

recall the days when she had known a kind father and mother, other than La Mort and his wife. But in the continual change and excitement that must have followed her abduction, her young mind had failed to retain a remembrance of anything beyond her life as Camilla La Mort.

They conversed awhile longer, and as they could still see the lights flitting about the Lone Estate, they arose and continued on, as Camilla supposed in a direction that would eventually bring them to the camp of the emigrants.

CHAPTER XIX.

AFLOAT ON THE RIVER.

KEEN-KNIFE's feelings were anything but pleasant when he realized that he was fastened up with a human corpse; and drawing his knife, he crept as far away from the body as possible, and began chipping an outlet overhead. But this was an undertaking of no little magnitude, and one that would require hours of labor to complete.

He worked away diligently, his mind occupied solely by the object of escape from the log and the loathsome thing within reach of him.

The log retained its balance well, and he could just feel motion enough to tell that it was floating slowly onward.

Suddenly the Prince was startled by a low moan within the log, and there was something in the sound that seemed familiar to him—something that aroused a dark suspicion in his breast, for he knew that the sound must have issued from the lips of the supposed corpse.

Leaving his work, he crept back toward the body, and when it was reached, he fingered the face and head over carefully, then continued his fumbling along the body until he came to the booted feet.

Then a cry of surprise burst from his lips, for he had discovered that the form was that of Frank Heyward.

All the sympathetic anxiety of the Indian was aroused, and the next moment he was bending over the motionless form of the unfortunate young man, who he had discovered was *not dead*, as he could feel his heart beating, and hear his long, labored breathing.

For over an hour the kind-hearted Friendly worked with the unconscious man. But his ministrings were not in vain. He soon had the joy of hearing him speak—inquire about his situation and where Camilla was; but his words were vehement and disconnected, showing that he was still slightly delirious.

Keen-Knife, after many attempts, finally succeeded in giving him a comprehensive understanding of his situation, and the manner in which he had come there. As to Camilla, he could tell him nothing.

The half-unconscious Heyward groaned in spirit and tossed in agony.

Keen-Knife succeeded in pacifying his spirit, and in learning the extent of his injuries. He had only been wounded on the head—stricken unconscious by the blow of a club. And then, when Frank was found to be in no serious danger, the Prince returned to his work of cutting through the log.

But his progress was slow. The side of the log was over three inches thick, and by the time he had made a hole sufficiently large to see out, he saw it was growing light.

Still he labored on, and by daylight the hole was increased in size sufficiently to enable him to run his hand out.

"I should judge we were nearly down to the ocean by this time, Keen-Knife," Frank finally remarked.

"The log floats slow," replied the Prince; then, applying his ear to the hole, he listened.

"A low cry escaped his lips.

"What is it, Prince—what is it?" asked Frank, eagerly.

"Hear voices. Ugh! heap good, for we're near the emigrants' camp."

"Is it possible?"

"Yes. I will call to them to help us out."

Then he placed his mouth at the hole and shouted at the top of his lungs repeatedly.

Several minutes passed in intense silence, then they heard the murmur of voices, followed almost immediately by the dip of oars.

"What's the matter here?" a voice suddenly asked.

Frank recognized the voice and answered:

"We're caged, major, and for God's sake get an ax and cut us out of this log!"

The canoe ran back to shore, and procuring an ax, was soon alongside of the floating log. Then the blows of a chopper were heard and felt by those within the log, and soon a large hole was made in the floating prison, and its inmates rescued therefrom.

Great curiosity and excitement prevailed over the situation in which they were found, and not without giving a complete history of their movements, the object of their leaving camp so secretly, and so forth, could Frank explain the predicament into which they had fallen. So he told the whole story from beginning to end.

Then, for the first time most of the emigrants learned that Frank had been in the country but a few months before, and that Major Tom's coming West was through a hope of recovering a child stolen from him years before.

The emigrants were all put upon their guard now, for not until they had heard Frank's story were they aware of their proximity to the Lone Estate, which Frank, as well as the two young hunters, had previously pronounced the hot-bed of outlawry.

Major Tom took the first opportunity to tell Frank that there was a traitor in their camp, and of the preconcerted attack to be made the coming night.

"And could neither of the scouts tell who the traitor is?" asked Frank, after hearing the major's story.

"No. It was a tall person, muffled from head to heel in a long blanket, and who always disappeared among the tents before the scouts could have time to follow it up. It may be some one that enters the camp after dark; but if not, I know of no one upon whom I could fix suspicion, unless it is your servant, Vasco."

"Never, major, *never*!" exclaimed Frank; "there is not a truer heart in this camp than Lew Vasco's."

"Then, in Heaven's name, who is the traitor?" exclaimed Major Tom, excitedly.

"It must be one of La Mort's spies that enters the camp after night."

"But how would a spy just stealing in in that way know aught of our money, and which tent is occupied by my darlings, Dora and Mildred? And then, according to what Bold-Heart says, the traitor is one of our party, and holds secret interviews with outside friends. The arrangement for the attack confirms the fact. The traitor is one of our party! To-night I hope we will find out who it is; and now, Frank, we have got to prepare for the preconcerted attack. Let us keep the whole terrible truth from the women and children, for fear of undue excitement. But let us take each man aside and inform him of the truth, that he may be prepared for the conflict. We'll have to get the two-wheeled cart around close to the river, with the money the devils so greatly covet, and which they'll get with a vengeance if they attempt to cross the river."

"If we succeed in defeating them, major, we should follow up our victory, and push on to the Lone Estate and rescue Camilla at once, for fear she may be spirited away. Rubal Ryan, the prairie-pirate, is there, and Camilla said she was to become his unwilling wife within three days."

Major Tom groaned in spirit.

"I hope," he said, "we can rescue her, Frank, for

even if she is not my child, I am anxious to deliver her from such a nest of devils, because *you love her, Frank.*"

"God bless you, Major Bronson!" exclaimed Frank.

Here the conversation ended and the two friends separated. The major sought each of his fellow-travelers and acquainted them with their coming danger. Preparations at once began to put the camp in a state of defense.

Never did men work harder than did they that day, and before the sun went down, the lower section of a block-house was completed. This would afford the women and children a safe retreat.

The wagons were all arranged around the tents on the outside of the building as a defense, while the two-wheeled cart, with its secret contents, was moved 'round close to the river-bank, facing the point from whence the attack was to be made.

By dark all was prepared for the conflict, and the preparations had been made so quietly and with such little outward concern that not one of the women suspected what was up; for, as the major had requested, not a man had hinted, to any of the women, of their threatened danger.

The women and children were sent into the block-house that night to sleep, while for want of room the men took to the tents on the outside.

At dark a number of guards were posted, and Keen-Knife and Bold-Heart put on the scout.

The hours wore on. Not a moment's sleep closed the eye of a man, but with throbbing hearts they lay and waited for the signal, calling them to the conflict.

CHAPTER XX.

THE ATTACK.

AT the silent hour of midnight, fully a score of canoes, containing, at least, three occupants each, put out from the east shore of the river near the Lone Estate, and dropped silently down the stream.

Not a sound of a voice could be heard: only the gentle rippling of the water broke the silence of the hour.

Grim and silent sat the painted and plumed voyagers, each clutching a rifle or tomahawk.

There were whites in the party, however. In a canoe in the rear of the main fleet, as it were, were three persons two of whom were whites. The latter were Manuel La Mort and Rubal Ryan. The third person was the Sioux chief Inkapaducab.

The three leaders were discussing in an undertone the probability of their expedition being a success.

"I feel certain," said La Mort, "that we have ample force to carry the camp by storm. The Spy sends word that the emigrants are all inexperienced in Indian warfare and cunning."

"That may all be, Don Manuel," returned Rubal Ryan. "But you must remember that Bold-Heart and Keen-Knife are both there, and their equals are not on the border."

"Waugh!" ejaculated the chief, indignantly, "Bold-Heart and Keen-Knife are cunning dogs, and their scalps will hang at the girdle of the Sioux scouts ere morning."

"No doubt of it, no doubt of it, chief," replied Ryan, at the same time nudging La Mort in a significant manner.

"There is one whose scalp will not be there to-night, I presume," said La Mort.

"You mean my rival, Frank Heyward."

"Yes. If he is still on the float he must be near the Des Moines ere this."

"Well, now, La Mort," said Rubal, "you have said Heyward will *not* be there; probably you can say whether Camilla and the devil that knocked me cold last night, *will* be there or not."

"I feel certain we'll find them both in the emigrants' camp. If so, Dico shall be whipped till there is not a grease spot of him left; and that girl, I'll—"

"Never mind that girl, my dear Manuel. She belongs to me," interrupted the prairie-pirate.

"Suppose we capture those *two* beautiful girls at the emigrant camp, whose will they be?"

Rubal Ryan laughed softly.

"You know the spoils of this expedition are to be divided equally, Don Manuel, do you not?"

"Oh, certainly," replied La Mort.

And so the conversation ran on.

In the mean time, Major Bronson sat alone in his tent, wrapt in darkness and silence. He was waiting the return of Keen-Knife whom he had sent up the river to watch the movements of the Indians.

Suddenly, as the hours wore on, a step was heard without. Then the door was darkened by a shadowy form and the Prince of the Prairies stood before him.

"What news, Prince?" the major asked.

"Three-score of Indians are at this instant concealed on the opposite side of the river, waiting the signal to attack our camp."

"Then go, Prince, and keep a close watch for the traitor! Let him give the signal, then watch out for the foe. If they make their appearance, give the signal, and I will repeat it by a blast upon this horn."

Keen-Knife glided from the tent, and even at that instant he saw a tall, shadowy form emerge from the door of the block-house! It stopped and gazed around, then crept on toward the river.

The Prince knew it was the mysterious Spy and traitor, but what was it doing in the block-house? How came it there?

The Friendly stole around to the right and reached the river-bank above the cloaked figure just as it tossed a dull ball of fire into the air.

Quickly he bent his gaze upon the opposite shore, from whose shadows he saw a number of dark forms emerge.

Then he heard the foe launching their light canoes, and a moment later the soft dip of paddles.

The Indians are coming!

A low cry like that of a hawk issued from the lips of Keen-Knife.

This was quickly followed by the sharp twang of a horn; then forth from their tents rushed the men, rifle in hand.

Down to the bank they ran, and forming in line, poured a deadly fire into the approaching canoes, giving vent to a loud, triumphant shout that seemed to issue in chorus from a hundred throats.

The savage foes were appalled—terror-stricken, and recoiled like a wave before the deadly fire of our friends.

High upon the midnight air rose the din of battle—the crash of fire-arms, shouts of victory, and groans of the wounded.

Some of the savages plunged into the river to try and escape what they believed an inevitable death, while high above the confusion of the moment could be heard the voices of La Mort and Rubal Ryan, trying to rally the panic-stricken savages.

Vain attempt! In two minutes not a savage nor outlaw, save a number of dead and wounded, was upon the river.

Great excitement, however, had been created at the block-house among the women and children. Major Tom and Frank hurried thither to pacify them, and just as they reached the building they heard a woman's scream a short distance east of them. They hurried on to see what was wrong, but could hear nor find anything.

Hastening back to the block-house they succeeded in quieting the fears of the women and children, and it was then that they learned Mildred Cleveland was gone.

"That must have been her scream, major," said Frank.

"Yes, yes. Some prowling devil of a red-skin has captured her. But, by my soul, she shall be rescued!"

"But how came she out of the block-house? asked one of the women.

"How came you all out? She has started up from her sleep and rushed out, as the door was unbarred, with affright."

"She was gone," said Dora, with whom Mildred had slept, "when I awoke."

"Poor girl!" sighed the major. "I will hunt up Keen-Knife and put him on the trail."

CHAPTER XXI.

LA MORT'S FLOATING FORT.

To describe the rage and disappointment of the three villains, La Mort, Rubal Ryan and Inkipaducab, would be quite impossible.

La Mort swore and raved like a madman: the chief gave vent to his emotions in deep gutturals, while the reckless Rubal Ryan laughed at them in a half-rejoicing manner. With him there was little care whether the battle was won or lost.

But they returned to the Lone Estate only to plan anew for the capture of the camp, and it was soon apparent what was next to be done, for all hands set to work, and soon a heavy raft was constructed, on which a bastion of logs was erected, and thus a *literal floating fort* was ready by noon.

At two o'clock this formidable structure was manned by some fifty Indians and outlaws under Ryan and La Mort; and then, by means of long poles, it was pushed out from the bank and permitted to drop, at the will of the current, down the stream.

So certain were they of the destruction of the camp, that Inkipaducab, with a number of warriors, had gone around upon the prairie to cut off the retreat of the defeated emigrants in that direction.

But what would have seemed the most singular to a casual observer, who knew whither the savages were going, was the fact of there being a beautiful young white woman aboard the raft with rifle in hand, as if ready for the coming conflict; and with whom La Mort was occasionally seen in consultation.

Who was she? and why was she there?

The raft drifted slowly and steadily on.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SECRET OF THE TWO-WHEELED VEHICLE.

THE work on the block-house was resumed, and every defensive point strengthened.

About noon some excitement was raised over the discovery of two persons far out upon the prairie. They were on foot, and approaching the Peninsula.

By aid of the major's field-glass they were enabled to distinguish them as a man and woman, and they saw the latter waving a white object as if appealing for assistance.

"It must be Mildred!" cried the major. "Frank, you and two or three others come with me to their assistance. They must be aided, for they seem in great excitement and distress."

Followed by Frank and others, the major ran to the corral, and mounting the fleetest animal there, dashed furiously away across the plain. The others followed on as fast as possible, but when the major reached the fugitives his companions were over a quarter of a mile behind.

To Bronson's surprise he found that the two persons were strangers—one a beautiful young girl and the other an aged negro, both seeming tired and travel-worn.

It was Dico and Camilla La Mort?

As the major drew rein before them, a low exclamation burst from the darky's lips, and he started back as if with sudden affright.

"Who are you?" asked Bronson, fixing his eyes upon the shrinking negro.

"Fugitives from the power of Don La Mort," replied Camilla.

Major Bronson started at the sound of her voice

as though he had been struck with a dagger. He fixed his eyes upon the maiden with a wild gaze, and his breast heaved as though a volcano was surging within it.

"Great Heavens!" he exclaimed, as he threw himself from his horse, "it is *her* voice and her image—my sainted wife—my dead Clarice!"

"Oh, good Lor'! save dis nigger's soul!" burst from Dico's lips; "dat am de very man dat lib in Floridy—dat am your father, Miss 'Milla. I remember his face well, chile, and—"

"This my father, Dico?" shrieked Camilla.

"Yes, dat am him, Miss 'Milla, and now dis poor ole nigger will hab to die!"

"Yes, yes, girl!" cried the major; "you must be mine—oh, God, yes—you are mine own daughter—mine own Annie! You bear *her* face—her voice—her eyes."

The old major clasped the maiden in his arms and poured a shower of kisses upon her. Intuitive love told him that she was his child, yet there was nothing positive—an uncertainty more agonizing than the pangs of death tortured him.

Frank and his companions came up.

Then occurred another joyous meeting—that of Camilla and Frank—which I will not attempt to describe.

The party returned to camp. Camilla was received with much kindness and every thing done to make her comfortable.

The major received from Dico's lips the fact that Manuel La Mort's true name was Gaspard La Muerte, and that he—Dico—had assisted his master to abduct Camilla from her parents ten years before at San Augustine.

He narrated the circumstances under which she was stolen, so in accordance with facts known to Major Bronson, that it left not a single doubt in his mind, but that Camilla was his child.

He had known Gaspard La Muerte as a bitter enemy, who hesitated at no crime when inspired with revenge. When the major was sojourning at San Augustine with his invalid wife and little child, the latter suddenly disappeared and could not be found, not even the faintest trace of it. But Major Tom had more than one good reason to believe that La Muerte had stolen the child, for about this time the villain disappeared and was never heard of more, until Frank Heyward returned from the West and gave him some hope that his child was found in Camilla La Muerte.

As the day wore on, Keen-Knife left the camp and stole away into the woods, but ere long suddenly burst into the camp in a state of great excitement, never halting until he stood in the presence of Major Tom Bronson.

"What now, Prince?"

"The Indians are coming again, this time upon a big raft! Walls protect them from which they cannot be dislodged with our rifles."

Instead of going into a fit of excitement, the major only smiled.

"When the white-haired chief sees the raft, he will not smile. And if he will look eastward over the prairie he will see a party of Sioux ready to cut off our retreat from the river."

"We'll attend to them, Keen-Knife," said Major Tom, composedly; then turning to his friends who had gathered around, he said:

"Boys, the red devils are coming, and we have got to prepare to meet them. We will have to open the money-box on the cart. Ah! there she comes now—a regular floating battery!"

All eyes were turned up the river in an instant, and behind a huge raft slowly rounding the bend of the river, about four hundred yards away. Above the top of the defense, upon it, they saw fully fifty plumed heads and painted faces of the Indian warriors, who set up a triumphant and demoniac yell as soon as they came in sight.

"To the money-cart, boys, to the money-cart!" shouted Major Bronson, turning toward the two-

wheeled vehicle, "and let us send them a bank-check on the happy hunting-grounds."

The men, with rifles in hand, hastily gathered in a circle about the vehicle, that stood near the river-bank, completely screening it from view of the enemy, while Major Tom and Frank Heyward were busily engaged about the vehicle, inside of the circle of men.

On came the huge raft, but as it was not within rifle-shot yet, the yelling, jeering savages did not withdraw behind their works.

A dead silence reigned in the camp. A settled expression of anxiety and impatience was written upon every face.

"Fall back, boys, fall back!" a voice suddenly rung sharply out on the air.

It was the command of Major Tom, and scarcely had it been uttered before the men fell back, revealing a small *brass cannon* mounted upon the two-wheeled vehicle, and Major Tom standing with lanyard in hand ready to fire it.

This was the secret contents of the cart.

The next instant there was a puff of white smoke, a thunderous roar, and a solid cannon-ball went skimming along the surface of the river, sending up great sheets of spray and striking the advancing raft near the center in front, throwing a cloud of splinters and sand into the air, and tearing a breach in the wall that Don La Mort had pronounced impregnable.

A yell of horror went up from the raft, and the next instant all the savages had disappeared behind their works.

"Ah, major!" exclaimed Frank, "you are a capital artillerist. Load, and give them another."

Again the howitzer was charged with a solid shot, and brought to bear upon the raft. Another breach was torn in the wall of the floating fort, sending the sand and timber in a perfect cloud overhead, and death and confusion into the ranks of the enemy.

And now, while Frank and the major continued to load and fire the howitzer, their friends opened a destructive fire with their long-range rifles, upon the enemy whom they could see through the broken wall.

A perfect crash of firearms rent the air mingled with the occasional roar of the howitzer. But the conflict was altogether upon one side. Before the savages could fire a shot, terror took possession of them.

Their leaders tried in vain to rally them, but those that were not killed or wounded took to the river and swam ashore.

In five minutes the floating fort, as La Mort termed it, was a perfect wreck, and cleared of all but the dead and dying. But these composed the greater part of the enemy's force, and now their cries of pain and agony rent the air.

Scarcely had the firing ceased when the mounted Indians on the prairie were seen approaching at a sweeping gallop. They were not far away, and in less time than it takes to write it, the major had his howitzer trained upon them, and sent a solid shot plowing through their ranks.

This terrible and unknown messenger of death, tearing both warriors and ponies to pieces almost, sent terror to the heart of every savage, and turning, the Sioux fled faster than they had approached.

This ended the conflict. The savages had received a chastising never to be forgotten; but now that the battle was over, its horrors stared the emigrants in the face.

The disabled raft had floated down and lodged against the bank, just opposite the camp, where every wail of the dying could be heard.

Our friends, however, were not wanting in Christian humanity, and with hearts that knew no wounded foe, but suffering creatures, they were soon aboard the raft administering to them.

Over thirty forms lay prostrate upon the bloody, slippery logs, half of whom were dead, and lying in

all conceivable attitudes. Some bore no wounds at all, but the awful expression of the rigid features showed that they had absolutely been frightened or stunned to death by the flying logs.

The spectacle was a terrible one, and almost the first face that Major Tom's eye fell upon was that of Don La Mort. He was dead, yet his face wore a natural and calm expression. The grim monster had seized him so suddenly that he had scarcely left his ghastly seal upon the wicked man's features.

"By Heavens!" the major exclaimed, "that is the face of Gaspard La Muerte!"

"Yes, or Don La Mort," replied the Boy Hunter.

"Heaven has meted him his reward at last," said Bronson, "but here is another white face."

"Ah!" exclaimed Bold-Heart, peering down upon the grim, contorted face; "that, major, is Rubal Ryan, the notorious Prairie-Pirate."

"Ma-jor—Bron-son!"

The cry came from the further extremity of the wreck, and every one that heard it started with surprise and excitement—not because its intonations bore the unmistakable evidence of death, but because it was the voice of a female, and one that sounded strangely familiar.

Hurrying across the raft in obedience to the summons, Major Bronson found a young woman half-sitting and half-reclining against the broken wall.

Masses of long purple black hair fell over her breast and concealed the wound from which her life was ebbing away in crimson drops. As the major advanced to where she lay, she raised her eyes—dark, lustrous orbs—and gazed up into his face.

A groan burst from the major's lips, and he started back with apparent terror.

"My God, it is Mildred Cleveland!"

The dying woman started slightly, and in a feeble voice she said:

"No, major, I am not Mildred Cleveland! I am Faye La Muerte—the spy that has been in your camp."

Another groan burst from Bronson's lips.

"Is this reality?—oh, surely not! surely not!" he exclaimed.

"It is, major," replied the dying traitress. "I have played a wicked part against you and yours. My being pursued into your camp by Indians was all a farce. The Indians were Rubal Ryan's prairie-pirates. And my story of being the daughter of Orville Vane Cleveland, of course, was untrue—told to ingratiate myself into your confidence, and learn the point of your destination and whether you had any valuable stock or amount of money in your party. Father knew that Orville Vane Cleveland was a dear friend of yours, hence my knowledge of such a person."

"Then your father knew that I was coming into this country, did he?" asked the major.

"Yes. Although father has made an outward show of honesty by the cultivation of the Lone Estate, he has been in direct communication with the Indians and prairie outlaws. And no sooner had you set foot within the territory than the fact was communicated to him through a spy that had known you in the South. The first night that I stayed in your camp I held an interview with a spy that was about, and sent word to the Lone Estate of your proposed colony and the point of its location. Father hated you, and resolved to destroy your whole band. But he has failed—we have all failed. That two-

wheeled vehicle—which I supposed contained your money—is what misled me, and thereby have I led all to death and destruction. Oh, what a life I have led. But I was trained to it from infancy, and I hope Heaven will forgive my sins. But, Major Bronson, you had a child stolen from you once, had you not?"

"Yes, yes!" gasped the major; "what of her, what of her, Mildred?"

"Father abducted her from your home in San Augustine years ago, and—"

"Where is she now?"

"I cannot say. Two evenings ago she escaped from the Lone Estate. We called her Camilla."

"Thank God! thank God! Camilla is my child!" cried the major.

"Then you have found her?" said the dying girl.

"Yes."

"Heaven be thanked!" murmured the girl.

"But you must have your wound attended to, Mildred," said the major. "Here, men, bear this poor girl tenderly to the camp, and let Doctor Pritchard dress her wounds and alleviate her suffering. Tenderly, tenderly, boys."

Frank Heyward and Bold-Heart lifted her in their arms and bore her ashore and to the camp. But, when they had laid her down upon the couch, prepared for her by Dora and Camilla, *she was dead!*

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE END.

We will pass over two days—memorable days in the history of the little band of colonists.

Faye La Muerte, the beautiful traitress, or Mildred Cleveland, as we have known her, was buried by the side of her father, in a little grassy glade in the woods not far from the Peninsula.

The dead and wounded Indians were given up to their red friends, who appeared under a flag of truce the day after the fight, asking for them.

The little band of colonists were molested no more by the red-skins. The brass howitzer proved a greater terror to them than a thousand armed dragoons would have done.

The domains of the Lone Estate were taken possession of a few days after the fall of La Mort. It was found entirely deserted, and not one of the emigrants ever heard of those that had composed the family of the outlaw.

The colony, planted on the Peninsula, prospered and grew to prominence. The broad acres were soon marked by the hand of man, and vast herds were seen upon its bosom.

As the recompense for his services, Bold-Heart asked of Major Tom the hand of his little ward, Dora Barnwell. The major was taken greatly by surprise, but of course he could not, and did not, refuse the gift; and in all his life he never had occasion to regret that he did.

And no sooner had he recovered his lost Annie, than she was taken from him again, by Frank Heyward.

Keen-Knife, the Prince of the Prairies, spent much of his time, when not out on the hunt or trail, with Rob Radcliff and his young wife; and went often to visit his dear old companion, Antelope Abe, and talk over their adventures when mere boys.

Old Dico lived with Frank and Camilla, a faithful, duty-loving old servant until his death.

THE END.

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